


The Great Tab Dope

And Other Stories

BY "OLE LUK-OIE"





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BY

“OLE LUK-OIE”

AUTHOR OF

‘THE GREEN CURVE’

E. D. Swift

THE
GREEN
CURVE
BY
E. D. SWIFT

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PREFACE.

THE following stories were written between the years 1903 and 1913, and have already appeared in the following magazines: 'Blackwood's,' 'The Strand,' 'The London.' The Author's thanks are due to the editors of these magazines for permission to reprint.

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THE GREAT TAB DOPE

A STUDY IN STAFF RIDES

"In the services hereafter specified a gorget patch $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches long and $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches wide is worn pointed at the outer end, sewn on to each side of the collar in front, and meeting at the fastening.

General Officers.—Scarlet cloth, a loop of gold three Russia braid along the centre, with a gold net button near the point.

Staff Officers.—As above, but with loop of scarlet silk, Russia, instead of gold, and gorget (20 line) button near the point."—*Dress Regulations*, 1900.

THE diminutive contractor's engine with the faded Union Jack streaming from its funnel clanked and puffed in a dot-and-go-one way as it drew the train of loaded ballast trucks across the bridge. No sooner did the cessation of the rumbling noise show that the last pair of wheels had

THE GREAT TAB DOPE

actually got off the girders on to *terra firma* than a subdued cheer arose from the men on the trucks and those clustering on the slopes of the embankment.

Two men were standing by themselves on top of the stone abutment. One—the taller—took his eye from the eyepiece of a theodolite. The other, who wore a blue flannel shirt and khaki breeches and gaiters, and was chewing an unlit cigar, started shuffling his feet in time to the rhythm of the puffing locomotive, and began crooning in a nasal falsetto a nigger melody as full of grace notes as an Eastern love-song.

“Shut up, Scudder,” said the observer peremptorily. “D’you want to knock the theodolite over?”

“Sorry, Major. That’s what they call a ‘Hoe-cake shuffle’ down South, and is a sign of thanksgivin’. How’s the deflection for O.K.?”

The Major, still stooping near the tripod-stand of the instrument, handed his notebook to the other. “Good enough!” he

added as he pulled a wad of telegraph forms from his haversack and began scribbling. "I must let the Chief of Staff have this as well as the Director. He has been specially keen on this bridge being through. Send this off now 'Clear the line,' will you?"

The cigar chewer took the form and hailed a man close by. "Say, Thompson, have the orperator send this off right now."

The two turned from the bridge and watched the little train puffing off jerkily right into the eye of the setting sun.

"Valves a bit out?"

"Yep: the 'Corfy pot's' been knocked about some this last two months, and the valves want settin'. Some all-fired fool hitched her on the mail down to Van der Hum's the other day, and nearly pulled the blamed little pug off'en her wheels."

Both continued thoughtfully to watch the now far-distant feather of steam until the sun sank below the hills and the air turned chilly: they started as the con-

tracting mass of the bridge close to them gave an ominous metallic creak.

"Good as a sunset gun," said the Major.

"Sure," replied the other. "Scared me some. Been somewhat of a strain for quite a while now, and for the moment I thought"—he looked at the girder fondly—"but she's still standing, and I feel just as proud as the one-armed trombone pusher in a freak band."

"Yes. It's a good job well done. I couldn't get up here till this afternoon, and I never expected you'd put it through before time. How you've managed it I don't know. I congratulate you, Scudder. He'll be very pleased."

"Who's tha'at?"

"The Chief of Staff—and the Director."

"Thaanks. We *have* hustled some. Come and have somethin' to eat, Major. I've still got a little of the stuff I brought from the Mine, and it's not Libby or Armour to-day. There's no call for you to hurry. The first up-train can't be along

for at least ha'f an hour, and we can have our skoff now. Jervis won't be off dooty for a while, but he won't mind our starting in." He turned round to some men: "Here, boys, just take all this gear down to the orfice."

Picking up a long-handled hammer with a highly polished head, he stepped off the stone pier and clambered down the embankment, followed by his commanding officer.

Waterbury P. Scudder—commonly known as "Pom-pom,"—of Hickory Gulch, Pa., and in peace time the engineer of the Bubble and Squeak and Squeak East Gold Mines of the Witwatersrand, was now a lieutenant of Irregulars in the South African Field Force, and wore Her Majesty's uniform. Eminently a hustler, he brought to his present military duties all the snap and energy for which the inhabitants of God's country are noted. In this instance he had managed to patch up the ironwork of Dop Donga railway bridge in his shops

at the Squeak East Mine, and had just repaired in record time a span blown up by the Boers. It was from witnessing the successful passage of a test train over the repaired construction and observing the deflection of the girders under the load that he and his senior were now retiring down the steep embankment. His commanding officer was a regular, who knew and liked "Pahm - pahm" — as the American pronounced his nickname — and thoroughly appreciated his energy. In Pom - pom's own words, he always "got there" somehow and "had the goods on him" as well.

They slid down the steep slope and walked up the river-bed past the men's camp to a snug little hollow close by the water, where a couple of lighted lanterns set upon a camp table outside two tents denoted the "Officers Mess; Dop Donga, Transvaal."

It was, for South Africa, a pretty place, and the shrunken stream, here quite clear, was bowered in a thick fringe of weeping

willows. The person who had selected the site for the officers' camp may have been actuated by a truly artistic desire to get away from all sight of the ugly destructive and constructive works of man, or he may have been merely impelled by the more utilitarian motive of placing the tents out of the prevailing winds and dust up above, but he had certainly hit upon a delightful spot for an *al fresco* meal. To the Major, who had just come up from another river crossing—a drab ash-heap—many miles away, this camp seemed a veritable Pisgah. In the growing dusk anything ugly which did happen to be near was quite hidden.

“By Jove, what an ideal camp you’ve struck, Pom-pom.”

“Yaas. We’re pretty comfortably fixed. Shan’t be stoppin’ long now, I guess. Here’s the soap, Major.”

In three minutes the two, washed and refreshed, sat down to the table.

“There’s nothin’ doin’ till they bring the

skoff. I'll just put me coat on and we'll hit a highball—or is yours straight?"

"Sparklet for me, please."

The host of the occasion went into his tent and returned buttoning up his khaki coat. Having poured out the drinks, he sat down.

"Here's lookin' at you, Major."

There was no reply. The movement of the guest's mug towards his lips had been arrested suddenly; his eyes were fixed in a frozen stare—as the subaltern thought—towards some spot just over his shoulder.

"What's that?" he said, as he whipped round and looked hastily behind him. He saw nothing.

"Anything wrong, Major?" he shouted, feeling all over his chest as if he expected to find a scorpion or tarantula or some other noxious insect. The reply was calm, not to say cold.

"What's all that *tamasha*? Have they given you a staff billet?" and the speaker

pointed an accusing finger at Pom-pom's neck.

"Search me, Major: there's no tomater on me, and I've hit no sta'f job. Why d'you ask?"

"Is that your own coat?"

"Sure thing."

"Well, what on earth have you got red tabs on your collar for?"

"Gee," said the subaltern, feeling nervously at his collar and looking momentarily abashed, "I'd forgotten them durned ta-bs. Look a here, Major — why, certainlee — you've got me right cold this time. Why — they're — just — red ta-bs."

"Yes, so I see, but I don't understand. You've been up to some monkey trick, Scudder. You must know that a regimental officer has no right to wear tabs. Red tabs or gorget patches are the insignia of the Staff. I don't know what any general would say if he saw you now. He'd have a fit. What does it mean, my

boy? Confess. Make a clean breast of it." Though the voice was grave, the eyes of the speaker were twinkling.

"See here. I'll tell you right now, sir. Jervis won't be here for a while. He's never seen me in this rig, and I don't want him to. I wouldn't have had you see it for a million." His tone was anxious.

"Wanted to cut a dash before the girls in Commissioner Street—eh?"

"No, sir; no girls for mine! It was for the bridge."

"For the *bridge*?"

The other nodded gravely. "You'll allow that it's been run pretty slick—quicker than Van der Hum's was?"

"Yes, that's correct, much quicker. It's been puzzling me how you have managed it. On that job you were complaining so much of delays in transit from Joh'burg to site."

"Yep, that's so; but I've never had a chance to put you next to the details.

We've had no delays on this outfit." He waved his hand vaguely towards the railway line. "No, sir. And it is the ta-bs that's done it—the ta-bs and the hat."

The subaltern dived into his tent and fetched out what in the feeble light of the two lanterns appeared to be a staff cap with red band, khaki cover, and shiny black peak complete. The peak looked much crinkled, and there was no lion-and-crown badge above it. He put the cap on his head solemnly, saluted, and bowed at the same time. "That's my conjuring outfit, Major."

The puzzled field-officer said nothing, but waited.

"You know that Van der Hum's didn't cut any ice compared to this place—as far as engineering goes. It was a soft snap. But getting the goods there was one of the worst propositions I ever struck. I tell you it was fierce."

"But why? This place is on another line, but it is farther off from the Squeak

East shops than Van der Hum's: not that a few miles of rail makes any odds either way."

"No, it was my ignorance. You see, I didn't know the Royal British Armeé then as I do now. When we were riggin' up Van der Hum's Bridge girders in the shops, we were working, shift on, shift off, night and day, cutting and riveting. As I got the stuff ready I loaded a freight-car—a truck, I mean—and despatched it. We were vurry careful to do the necessary, and every car was fitted out with a whole bunch of warrants and waybills and receipts, and stamped and signed, and licked and sealed, and painted in two-foot letters 'Van der Hum's Drift.' It was labelled 'Urgent,' 'Rapid Transit,' 'Perishable Freight,' 'Confidential,' and with every regulation mascot countersign that me or James M'Nulty—he's my old foreman smith at the Mine—could think of. We did our best to make it fool proof. Every time we sent off a car I wired to Jervis down

to Van der Hum's to flag everything on wheels and send me down an O.K. return when he drew a winner. After I'd sent off three loads from the Mine siding on separate days and got no orfice from Jervis I began to worry some. So I wired him to find out what the matter was. 'Got nothing so far,' was the answer. This was the third day, mind you, and it's only sixteen hours' run, even these times, from Joh'burg to Van der Hum's. By that time I felt I was up against bad trouble somewheres, and I kept the orperators busy tickin' to every railway sta'f orficer on the road. I wired up the line and down the line and sideways. But I couldn't get any track of them cars. I was beginning to feel pretty bad, because I had promised the Director personallee that I'd do my bit and get the stuff on the spot by the 14th. Say, Sixpence," he broke off as a Kaffir appeared with a saucepan, "fetch the skoff right now. No wait for the other baas."

As soon as they were both served and eating, he continued, "I felt it was up to me to get a move on somewheres, so I got James M'Nulty fitted out with a pass and a warrant, and we put out together to prospect. Nothin' doin' at Elands Junction. The railway sta'f orficer — Capt'n Shute — is fine: he had passed the stuff on all right. Wal—on we went, moseying around and making inquiries at every depot, and raising four kinds of Hell with the R.S.O.'s, all with no result till we got to Jakhalputs. There we struck it rich. There were me three cars, sandwiched among all the strays and empties of the whole system —side-tracked. Not on a proper siding, mind you, but on a temporary piece of track thrown down on the *veld*, with as many kinks in it as a beaten 'rattler.' I was fair mad by now, and I chased out the R.S.O."

"Who was it?"

"I don't know his name, but he was one of the bad men. You know you have two sorts of British orficer,— one sort is

a special brand of white man, and the other—wal, he's the other thing. This fellow was a tall, pie-faced, slick-haired, rubber-necking dude, with a monocle and a boiled collar. I sized him up P.D.Q.; but I wasn't out for trouble, so I spoke soft. 'Say'—no, it was 'Please, Cap,' I said, 'what about my three bogie cars that you've side-tracked here? They're vurry important. They're full of bridging stuff wanted bad down to Van der Hum's. What's the matter with hitching them on the next train?' He did not cotton to me, and rubbered at me over the edge of his collar good and plenty. I was getting mighty riled."

"What sort of a kit were you in?"

"Oh, I had gotten regimental breeches and gaiters on, and a shirt—a nice shirt I bought in Joh'burg—hedge-sparrer's blue, the storeman called it. I have it on now. It was some hot in the train and I'd taken me coat off. I was using a Panama hat."

"Had you your hammer in your hand?"

"Why, certainlee. I'm kind of fond of my ha-mmer. It's a mascot. I druv the last rivet in the hull of the battleship *Pamunkey* with that l'll ha-mmer when I was in the Navy Yard."

"Well, can you be surprised at the poor devil of an R.S.O. being a bit taken aback?"

"Yes, sir! Why shouldn't I carry a ha-mmer? I've seen orficers carry all sorts of freak sticks. Bits of rhino horn that look like pieces of candy: sjamboks all broken until they droop about like strips of biltong: knobkerries with a knob as big as a pumpkin. Why, some of the docs. wave a stethoscope at you. I didn't much mind not getting the glad hand; but it was the whole frozen mit that made me tired. This R.S.O. looked at James and me as if we were greasers or a bunch of Dagoes. 'What the dooce are you talking about? What do I know about your *cars*? Why don't you address me properly? Who are you?'

"I tell you I was hopping mad now. 'See here, Clarence,' I butted in, 'it don't cut much ice who I am, but Waterbury P. Scudder is my name, and I am a loo-tenant in the——'

"'Lootenant be damned!' he says. 'You must be drunk: one of these casuals'—*casual* he called me—and——"

"Yes; but he didn't mean what you mean by a casual; he meant a single man—a detail separated from his unit."

"I didn't feel much of a detail then, Major, and my grip began to tighten on my little ha-mmer, when old man M'Nulty gives me a yank by the slack of me pants. 'Easy, Mister Scudder, easy,' he says, 'or we'll both get it in the neck and spend our day in chokee. See that bald-headed old coyote there with the red cravat on him? He's the boss of this joint. What *he* says goes, every time. I've been watching them tumble round whenever he says a piece.' Comin' along I saw a senior sta'f orficer. I passed the ha-mmer to Jim and

gave a real hardwood, nickel-fitted salute. I couldn't spot his rank, so struck out for the best. 'Good-morning, General,' I says.

" 'Good-morning, I'm not a general—only a colonel,' he says. 'What can I do for you?'

"But Clarence wanted to get his word in first. 'This man's drunk, sir, and is masquerading as an orficer——' I whipped round, but when Jim gave me a pull again and whispered: 'The old guy for yours.' Old Jim is a peach. I tumbled.

" 'No, sir! I'm not drunk, but this orficer is delaying some of my ironwork which is urgently wanted at Van der Hum's Bridge. Until that gets through the bridge can't be repaired, and the army is waiting on it.' I added a lot more, but I needn't give you the whole song and dance again now. What I said went, and it soothed me some to see Mister Rubberneck hustle around to get those cars hitched on to the next train. But I was not through with it even then, 'cause every other R.S.O.

seemed dead set on unhitching my stuff and sending something else along, and I had a job to prevent it. They didn't pay much attention to what I said anyway, even when they didn't treat me as a crazy Dago. That, Major, is what delayed Van der Hum's some sixty hours.

"When we started on this new proposition I had learned a bit. Leastways old James had struk somethin' and put me wise. 'Mister Scudder,' he said, 'the whole of this show is bluff. If you don't want to be left *you* must bluff.'

"'Bluff,' I said; 'what d'you take this for? A game of poker? It's war, my boy—war! D'you get it?'

"'Yes. But there's a dope that is going to prevent any of this outfit seeing your hand.'

"'Whar's tha'at, James?'

"'Why, them little bits of red rag on the neck. If you show a red streak round your hat and two spots on your collar you'll chloroform the crowd. I've seen enough

on this journey to discover that they are the great dope of the 'hull British army. Any one without 'em is hoodooed all the time. It's pie !'

"I saw at once that ole man M'Nulty had struck it, and so long as I wasn't held up in the same way over this bridge, I reckoned there wasn't much harm to me trying the dope. Here's the ta-bs and here's the hat."

"But how did you get the stuff?" gurgled the Regular. "From a signal flag?"

"Nope. I remembered that in the last share out of warm clothing and comforts sent out by your British ladies I drew a sort of liver-pad and a Waterloo hat—a woolly thing."

"A Balaclava helmet?"

"That's it. I knew it was one of your durned battles. But it was out of the liver-pad I got my raw material."

"Ah! But I see you've got the little buttons and all."

"No, sir! Those are just paper-clips from my orfice, put through my collar and flattened out at the back. They scratch some, but they're all right. The shiny peak to the hat is a bit of rubber from an old pair of gum boots fixed on with glue. Major—it's worked like a *cha'am*! I've doped the 'hull shootin'-match. Got them beat—beat to a whisper!"

"Well, tell me about it."

"You won't get mad with me? 'Cause it sounds a bit of gall, now it's all over."

"No; go ahead."

"Wal. I rode along in the same train with the first wad of stuff for this place. When we stopped at a station I didn't jump down and chase no R.S.O. No, sir! I sort of lolled me head out of the window of the brakeman's caboose—guard's van—and whistled up the nearest Tahmmie, put a lot of taffy into my voice and said, 'Look heaw, my man, give the R.S.O. my compliments and tell him I want to see him.'

The man always saluted and says, 'Vurry good, sir,' ev'ry time. Then up comes the R.S.O.—fussing a bit. However, he smoothed down some when he sees my hat and ta-bs. 'Good morning, sir,' he says. 'Good morning,' says I. 'I have a truck of bridging material heaw for Dop Donga. Just see it goes on right now, please.'

"'Fraid I can't, sir. I have ten shorts of supplies and one bogie of forage, and——'

"'See here,' I says. 'I'm on Lord Kitchener's sta'f, and he has sent me special to see that this stuff makes good at Donga as soon as possible—if not sooner. The last words his *lordship*'—that always made 'em cough—'said to me were, "If any one puts up any kick, you tell him it's the Chief of Sta'f he's up against, and wire me." Naow, old son, if you know Lord K. as well as I do, you'll just be chasing yerself to do what he wants without any chin-music to it. That's the proposition. Thanks awfly.'"

The narrator took a drink and pushed the same old unlighted cigar between his lips. He looked rather anxiously at the Major's face. What he saw encouraged him to proceed.

"I did the best that I could with the soft Christmas Number talk, but times I let out a touch of real Amurrican, and the patient would look fairly puzzled. But 'His lordship's last words to me' fetched the possum down every time. Every car got here to the tick. James was right. Them red ta-bs are the greatest things that ever happened."

"But didn't any one spot that you had no badge on your cap?" said the Major. He was also wondering how this marvellous imitation of the way a British staff officer talks struck the persons addressed.

"Not on your life! I was fanning the flies off my face with it when anybody come along, and it al-ways happened that the badge was in my hand. There was not so many flies on me as I let on there

was. Major, I just hate to have to say it, but it was a liver-pad rebuilt Dop Donga Bridge. Sure thing. Yes, sir, and those girders there de-pend on two bits of cloth and a pair of paper-clips, and it seems to me that the 'hull British Armee de-pends——."

"There she is," interposed the Major hastily, as a distant whistle sounded. "I must be off, but I don't quite tumble to the liver-pad. Was it a plaster?"

Pom-pom dived into his tent again, and after turning the contents of his kit-bag on to the floor, produced one half of a red flannel chest-protector!

"Here you are, Major. Here's the raw material, the Sta'f Orficer factory *and* the finished article all canned, soldered, and labelled! I am going to start a cannery or a clothing store."

"Scudder, I pass, this once; but no more. See?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good-bye."

"But I'm coming up the bank to see you on board."

"No. I want to go alone. By the bye," he added as he rose to go, "I didn't know you knew Lord Kitchener. When did you meet him?"

"See here, Major, you should be up on top before the train gets in. She may not stop if they don't flag her, and she's mighty close now. Good-bye, sir."

Half-way up the embankment the commanding officer exploded. Between his bursts of laughter he heard below him the tattoo of a knife on the table and the twang of the irrepressible one's voice raised again in song:—

"Oh, my name is Solomon Levi,
And I live in Salem Street,
And I deal in fancy ulsterettes,
And everything else that's neat."

The performer, now minus hat and tabs, was still at it when his brother subaltern Jervis turned up for his food.

"Sorry to miss the C.O.," said the latter.

"I couldn't get away before. I suppose that was him I heard going up the bank. What an awful cough he's got."

"Yaas. The ole man is not what he was. The strain of this bridging racket's breaking him up, I guess. There's your food, Jervis. Get busy."

IN THE VALLEY.

I.

“HALLOA ! What’s that?” the lanky subaltern on the bay horse asked suddenly of the man riding alongside, pointing towards the river with his switch.

Both men halted, and the speaker dismounted, slipped his arm through the bridle, and slouched down the shelving bank to the water’s edge, staring hard at the ground, here quite bare and caked over with a light crust of sandy mud. His companion jumped off his horse and followed, looking slightly mystified until he reached the river. At the very edge of the water was a small inlet with square

end and parallel sides, a Lilliputian harbour some four inches long and three broad, into which the stream was lapping. About five feet away, where the soil was harder, was a second similar but fainter indentation.

"I thought so," said the subaltern, tracing with his switch one of the two tracks which led from the inlets upwards to the short grass at the top, where they were lost.

"Two wheels!" were his next words. Then, stopping to scrutinise more closely the very indistinct impressions of a hoof, he almost snarled, "Mule-cart!"

In contrast to what it had been up till this moment, his tone was peevish. He seemed to be quite inconsequently perturbed by these trifling marks on the river-bank. But he had no cause to show, nor intention of showing, temper to his subordinate, and would have welcomed any refutation of his conclusions based on pro-

bability. Sudden, however, as had been his action, and jerky as had been the sentences snapped out, they were now full of significance to the sergeant, who was a few paces away, peering into a large patch of weeds and grass which extended right down to the water. The sergeant stood still and frowned. Amongst the herbage at his feet the edge of the bank was serrated with many marks similar to the two in the open — dozens of little places in which the river could play at harbours. There were also crescent-shaped depressions where the soil had been stamped into an irregular carpet pattern of hoof-marks. And here again—but, owing to the growth of weeds, only to be seen after close inspection—were tracks, broad wheel-tracks running up the bank.

“Guns across this way, I think, sir,” he suggested.

He did not “think”: he knew positively. But the news was so very unwelcome that

he felt instinctively that the blow which certainty would convey should be dealt by the senior to himself.

In three steps the subaltern was on his knees among the nettles, measuring with his clenched fist the breadth of the tracks. There were the proofs, all the hoof-marks faced one way. Artillery must have crossed from the other side. He did not especially care how many or what sort of guns there had been; it was enough for him that any could get over. Still kneeling, he looked up across the stream. Its troubled appearance and rapid flow, and the boulders breaking its surface, showed its shallowness; and diagonally opposite, some fifty yards up, the far bank shelved at a suspiciously feasible grade.

"Just follow the tracks up the weedy place and see what there is above. I'll have a look at the other side."

He mounted, urged his horse into the stream, and, carefully following the broken water, rode on the slant towards the piece

of shelving bank on the far side. There was no need to land. At ten yards from the shore he could plainly distinguish the signs he was seeking but did not wish to find. For a few moments he sat staring at the wheel-marks, while the river foamed against the chest of his horse. Again did he appear to be quite unwarrantably disturbed by what he saw. Indeed, so engrossed was he that he gradually relaxed his position and allowed his feet to drag in the stream. It was only the sensation of cold as the water crept up his shins that awoke him to facts. And it was none too soon, for his mount was pawing in that unmistakable manner which betokens an earnest desire to roll. Touching him with his one remaining spur, he turned the animal, which floundered back towards the sergeant at the starting-point.

“Ford, right enough, and a good one. Found anything more?”

“No, sir. All signs lost in the hard grass up top.”

The subaltern rode out of the river on to the bare ground and, still thoughtful, halted there without dismounting. The water dripped off his horse, collected into a pool, and then meandered about till it reached the original wheel-track, down which it trickled back to the river, thus bravely advertising the slight impression which had so very nearly escaped notice. The sergeant essayed consolation.

“Bit of luck—this bare place, sir.”

“Yes, curse it—I mean, thank God for it—and for the cart that came across it—and the mules that drew the cart—and the ass that drove it! If it wasn’t for him we should have spotted nothing. The other marks are absolutely hidden.” He looked inquiringly up the bank. “The detachment ought to be coming along soon. Just go back and hurry them under cover. Mount the sentry, and get the tools and stuff down here. We’ve used our last stick of dynamite, haven’t we?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, bring powder.”

“How much? The usual?”

“Yes, one will do. No. We’ll give them a double dose since we’ve no dynamite. Bring down a couple of barrels. This must be a very old place—almost disused—and they’ll probably count on our not having discovered it. If they come at all, it’s here they’ll try to cross for a cert—especially if we don’t fix it. There are plenty of likely spots for the powder up there. I sha’n’t be five minutes picking out one.” He started to move in the direction in which he was looking. The sergeant turned his horse round, then hesitated.

“Well, what is it?” said the other testily.

“You remember—there’s only that one rifle left, sir?”

“I know. Bring it along.”

The sergeant said no more, and rode off up the bank. The subaltern again dismounted and led his horse slowly up-

stream until he was opposite the shelving place on the far side, where the river was about fifty yards wide. At this spot there was a narrow strip of sand from which the bank rose somewhat steeply to a height of thirty feet above the water. The slope was dotted with bushes, and at its top was a large tree whose tangled roots were half exposed. Hitching his horse to a bush, he scrambled about half-way up. He turned and, looking towards the far end of the ford, shifted about, carefully aligning his position on the prolongation of the depression which led down to the water on that side of the river. He then solemnly planted his switch, butt first, in the loose sandy soil. After a second careful scrutiny all round he slid down the bank, sat down by his horse, and proceeded to fill a pipe.

Resting his head on his hand, he smoked on, occasionally scanning the far side of the river. There the approach running down to the ford was in a kind of groove, which had been worn or excavated at some

time, but had long been disused, and was now quite overgrown. Indeed, without some clue, such as was given by the knowledge of the existence of the ford, it might have been passed a hundred times without its real nature being detected. Still, it was the obvious way of approach for any body of troops trying to cross the river, while for wheeled traffic its use was almost inevitable. And it was just the kind of bottle-neck, or, in military language, "defile," where vehicles would crowd together. Now the subaltern wanted them crowded, if they came at all, and it was at the very spot to which such a mass would present itself end on that he had placed his switch. In his jargon this spot commanded and enfiladed the approach.

So far so good. Though the little job of planting the stick in the earth was over, and he could do nothing more at present, there was still something on his mind. He drew from his haversack a sketch-map. On this map certain points

along the river had been marked conspicuously with red-ink crosses, and he proceeded to follow up each of these marks with a pencil, ticking them off and counting aloud as he did so. As he counted eleven he moved the pencil on to his own position. The fact that there was no red mark there seemed to upset him.

“Not my mistake; but *I’ve* got to face the music,” he muttered, and drew in a cross so incisively that he snapped the point of the pencil. He re-sharpened it with deliberation, then wiped the blacklead off his thumb on his wet boot. The string with which the upper had been so carefully lashed to the sole had been displaced by his stirrup, and a wet and pink big toe was peeping out between two layers of gaping leather. Observing this, the shadow of a smile crossed its owner’s thin face. But he had little real cause for smiling.

II.

The theatre of war in which the detachment was operating was a sparsely-populated area in which the resources of civilisation had never been many. Now that the struggle had been going on for some time, so much damage had been done that all the conveniences to be found in a settled country were at a premium, and the river—an important strategic feature—had had its value as an obstacle much enhanced by the wholesale destruction of its bridges. All those still standing happened to be in the hands of the army to which the subaltern and the sergeant belonged. To illustrate the situation by a business parallel, their side had succeeded in establishing a corner in bridges. For the enemy there were no bridges to be had, except at the prohibitive cost in lives which attacks on strongly-defended positions would entail. The result of this was

that a feverish demand had sprung up for fords—for which there had been no inquiry for years—and their value had suddenly appreciated. Old fords had been opened up, new ones had been discovered, and the cross-river traffic went on as briskly as ever. Then the commander who controlled the bridge market became desirous of also controlling the fords. But the method in which he was trying to manipulate this commodity differed from that which had been employed in the case of the bridges. It was a purely negative process, for he neither wanted the fords himself nor could have spared the men to hold them. The only thing to be done, therefore, was to pursue a dog-in-the-manger policy and deny them to the enemy.

Fords can be denied to an enemy in many ways besides by being held and defended. One of the simplest is to sow them with harrows, ploughs, or wire fencing, or to construct barbed-wire entangle-

ments under the water. But, distinctly annoying and offensive to troops in a hurry as such obstructions are, they are otherwise trivial, for they can be removed at leisure and their moral effect is negligible. When it is desired to add a minatory effect to the merely physical obstacle it is necessary to make an appeal to the nerves. This can best be done by explosives.

It is a truism that in land warfare the value of mines and suchlike contrivances of the sapper is almost entirely psychological. For every man actually damaged by their action hundreds suffer mentally either from the knowledge or the mere suspicion of their existence. Indeed, the very rumour of their presence is sufficient to induce an Agag-like method of progression.

And not only does this apply to those for whose hurt the mines are intended; it affects those whose duty it is to prepare them, since explosives have no discrimination and are not respecters of persons. For the mine-layer in war, as for the active

terrorist in peace, there is always the haunting dread of being hoist by his own petard. Dealing as he does with unstable and extremely violent chemical compounds and rough, improvised mechanisms, he literally carries his life in his hands, at his finger-tips, at his very toes. Too rough a touch, a stumble, and another life has to be written off the ledger of his side as "expended." Mine-laying demands the very highest form of bravery, the unemotional courage inspired by self-control, determination, and a sense of duty. The man undertaking it usually works with very few others, secretly and in obscure places. Neither one of a crowd, nor actually fighting, he is not inspired to gallantry by the presence of comrades, the enthusiasm or passion of the moment, or the sheer lust of combat. There is no struggle with a living, sentient adversary to excite him. Excitement of a sort he has in plenty, but it is of a very one-sided nature, such as is afforded by a cold-blooded contest against a ghostly

enemy, which is quite unresponsive, quite undemonstrative, until the last moment. If the mine-layer wins in the struggle, though the result of his work may not affect anything, he has been through a far more severe trial than many a man who commits a gallant deed in the heat of action. But he is seldom acclaimed as a hero, for few know what he has accomplished. When he fails, the simple word "Missing," under which his name appears, will usually be a literally correct epitaph.

It was in duty of this nature that the detachment was now engaged, and to the officer sitting smoking by the river it was no new experience. Familiarity had not, however, in his case bred the proverbial contempt; he had too much experience and wisdom to treat the agencies employed by him with anything but the respect due to their power. Moreover, during the last few days his nerves had been almost continuously on the stretch, for his life had very frequently depended on the sensitive-

ness of fulminate, the exact tension of a wire, the stiffness of a trigger, or the care with which an assistant placed his feet. But his obvious depression on this occasion was not due to any of these normal causes.

The usual system in this form of warfare, and the one hitherto employed by the subaltern, had been to place small dynamite mines, mechanically and automatically controlled, on the pull-out or near side of the fords. Since such mines were quite local and limited in their radius of action, they were reinforced, wherever possible, by a fougasse.

This mediæval device, though not often met with in ordinary life, is still used in warfare, and deserves a word to itself. Under its high-sounding French name—otherwise *foyer au feu*—it is really a rudimentary but fearsome gun made in the earth. No mere mine, bomb, or simple infernal machine which scatters fragments of metal around in vague passion, the fougasse throws its projectiles with precise and

aimed malice. A slanting hole, carefully aligned in the right direction, is dug in the ground. This forms the bore of the gun. A powder charge having been placed at the bottom, the excavation is loaded to the brim with brickbats, stones, scrap-iron, or any natural missiles sufficiently heavy to cause hurt to the human body when hurled violently against it. The efficacy of this engine of destruction partly depends upon the principle so quickly seized upon by the small boy old enough to discover that Nature has provided him with an arm for the express purpose of throwing stones at other small game. When he can shoot into the "brown" of a flock he throws a stone, trusting to the number of targets to assist in registering a hit. When there is only one target, and that a small one, he thinks to increase his chance by multiplying missiles, and hurls a handful of gravel. The fougasse heaves a shower of missiles over a large area. And even if none find a billet, the fountain of earth and rocks pro-

jected on high cannot fail to impress the most unimaginative spectator. This, after all, is an important part of its object.

Until he had stopped the sergeant by his exclamation at sight of the mark at the river's edge the subaltern had imagined that his work of the last six days was over. He had been sent out upon a raiding expedition to block all the crossing-places in a certain stretch of the river. There were ten of these marked on the map supplied to him, and, starting out with a waggon-load of the stores necessary to his machinations, he had, with a proper adjustment of means to the end, expended all his dynamite in fixing them up.

It was for this reason that he was now forced to rely upon a fougasse alone for the eleventh ford just discovered, which was not shown on the map, and the existence of which was evidently unsuspected at headquarters. The revulsion of feeling at its discovery at a moment when he had thought his work done accounted partly for the

subaltern's disgust when first he had seen the tell-tale wheel-track on the bank. Filled as he had been with bitterness against the people responsible for this mistake, unworthy thoughts had momentarily assailed him. He had carried out his orders at great danger. Evidently no one knew of this place. Why should he risk his life again?

Though he was about to concentrate his efforts upon a fougasse of double power, it was not the dangers of the thing itself, which, after all, were no greater than they had been with all the others, that was weighing on his mind. He had chosen its site so that most of its missiles would sweep the approach on the far bank; and, by placing the trip-wire somewhere near the bare patch of mud, one of the leading horses or vehicles issuing from the river would probably fire the charge just at the moment when the approach would be packed full of men, horses, and waggons or guns. It was all quite simple. For carrying out his

kindly intention the subaltern had the knowledge, the powder, the wire, and the tools. Besides these things, all that was necessary was a spare rifle. He had a rifle. And it was the nature of this weapon, coupled to the fact that it was the only one available, which was especially troubling him.

The simplest method of exploding an automatic engine of destruction of this nature when no electric appliance is available is by means of a firearm, which contains in a handy form all the necessary mechanism. The train of action is started by the victim treading on or tripping against a hidden wire. The jerk thus conveyed to the trigger fires a blank cartridge in the chamber of the weapon, and the flash of the latter ignites the powder charge in which the muzzle is embedded. This necessitates a long-barrelled firearm. The war had now been carried on almost to a state of exhaustion, and had reached the retail, pettifogging stage when single lives

and single weapons are counted. Not only was an obsolete pattern of rifle employed for this kind of work, but, in order to avoid by any chance presenting the enemy with still serviceable, though old, weapons, the stocks of all those used for the purpose were sawn off short, so that they could not be presented to the shoulder.

The subaltern had started with seventeen of such mutilated firearms, and had already made use of sixteen on the ten fords with which he had dealt. The seventeenth had been found to be so dangerously defective that it had been put on one side and, in order to prevent any fatal mistakes, had been branded with a piece of rag tied on to it. In this pattern of gun the breech was opened by depressing a lever behind the trigger-guard, while the upward movement of the lever closed the breech and cocked the rifle. The fault of this particular specimen was that the upward motion of the lever sometimes not only closed the breech but fired the rifle without the trigger being

touched. An awkward habit enough for a man shooting, it was worse than awkward for one who was gripping the lever when a small volcano happened to be at the muzzle of the rifle. Had this specimen, however, been straightforward and misbehaved on every occasion, the certainty would have simplified matters. No one in his senses would have attempted to use the thing.

But there was a subtlety about it, for now and again the action worked correctly, and the rifle did not go off until the trigger was pressed. This, of course, gave the glorious uncertainty of chance to any one dealing with the weapon; but the odds against the dealer were too great, and the penalty for losing was too severe, for even a confirmed gambler to contemplate with equanimity. The subaltern knew something about the mechanism of rifles, but he now had neither the tools nor the time to take this one to pieces and put it together again. And he could

not make use of any of the weapons carried by his detachment, for he was already deficient of two. He would, however, in any case have hesitated to deprive one of his men of his "best friend." His own repeating pistol was not long enough to serve.

In a few minutes the waggon and detachment arrived, the powder-barrels were rolled down, and digging was begun at the spot marked. The freshly-excavated earth, being of too bright a colour to leave lying about, was shovelled on to blankets, dragged down the bank, and tipped into the river. Between these intermittent journeys a heap of boulders was gradually collected near the hole. Some were jagged, and some were round and smooth, the only limit to size being the weight which one man could carry. The four men thus employed in excavating and collecting included the sergeant. A fifth was with the horses ensconced in a suitable hollow

under some trees at the top, while the sixth kept a look-out from the highest point near by. The work—by now almost a matter of routine—had been started without more orders from the officer, and the excavation proceeded at great speed in the soft soil. Beyond once inspecting the hole to check the alignment of the axis of his “gun” and to gauge the thickness of earth left above it, the subaltern paid no attention to what was going on.

He remained seated, absorbed in playing with an object which the sergeant had handed to him. It was half a rifle with a dirty strip of rag hanging from it; and the subaltern was trying to discover what, if any, law governed its erratic behaviour. Holding it this way and that, he continued to open and close the breech, and kept a careful record in his note-book of each trial, much as a “system crank” books the *coups* at a roulette-table. For every attempt he

put down a tick, and each time the thing worked right he crossed the tick. At intervals he would study the diagram produced, try to analyse it, and would rack his brains in an effort to obtain a rule—rigid or flexible—which seemed to govern its eccentricities. Treating it as a cryptogram, he did his best to discover any cycle, periodicity, or recurrence in the pattern booked by him, to weave a rhythm into its irregular metre; he even endeavoured to set it to music. At moments he did trace sequences in the runs of success; but in no case did he obtain more than two complete cycles. It was all in vain. He might as well have attempted to analyse the dance of the gnats which were now hovering over his head—for he had put out his pipe when the powder came upon the scene.

At last he gave up the hopeless attempt at a solution by numbers, and bethought him of another method. If it were grit or a loose flake of rust which

was causing this unaccountable behaviour he might possibly distinguish something by the sense of touch. He might be able to tell what the lever was about to do by the feel, the texture, so to speak, of its pull when opened. He had not dared to oil it—the lubricant might so ease the action that the rifle would go off every time it was closed, and thus spoil even the outside chance which he was now prepared to take. With eyes shut in order to concentrate all his faculties upon his sense of touch, he had been for some time intent on his new game when he was interrupted.

“All ready now, sir.”

By this was implied that the powder was loaded, and the subaltern handed over the rifle. There was no need for him to superintend the fixing of it or the packing of the stones. There was practically no danger until a cartridge was placed in the chamber of the rifle, and that he always did himself at the

very last. "Sing out when you've fixed it," he said. "I'll just go across and have a look from the other side."

With the reins gathered in his hand he was just about to mount when the sentry on top of the bank whistled three times.

The men under the tree at once stopped working and lay down. The subaltern and sergeant, who were out in the open, ran towards the tree, the former towing his unwilling beast by the bridle.

"Waggon and team all right?" said the officer, as they ran.

"Yes—under a nice bit of scrub, sir."

When the two men got well under the tree, they too lay down under its thickest part. The three whistles had evidently been some well-understood signal of alarm, but no move was made to pick up the rifles lying about—the whole party seemed to be listening. Above the burbling of the rapid rose a

humming noise. A vague throbbing in the sky, its direction could not be guessed; it seemed to pervade the air. The sound quickly increased in volume to a loud buzz and then to a muffled roar. The five men by the river peered up through the foliage. A large grey biplane flew high up in the air across the river from east to west. It carried three men. Glistening in the sunlight like some gauzy-winged fly, it flew straight on without sign until the sound of its propeller died away to a gentle hum in the distance. The men reassumed their duties, and the subaltern mounted.

"Looks as if they were watching this ford, sir," said the sergeant.

"Yes. They're not doing that for nothing. They'll probably try it to-night. Wish I'd put in three barrels."

With this kind sentiment the subaltern rode over to the far side again.

After a short time he heard across the water the signal that everything

except his share of the work had been done. He rode up and down on the far side, examining from there the near bank in order to ascertain if any rearrangement was necessary for concealment of the work, and then he recrossed. Nothing except the protruding breach of the rifle now betrayed the fougasse, for all the stones had been covered over with dry earth. Even a dead bush was lying ready for him to plant artistically when he should have finished his own duty of adjusting the tension and loading the rifle. The wire was ready in place, lightly buried where it crossed under the probable "pull-out" of the ford, and led over two straining pieces of wood, also buried, which acted in the same way as violin bridges. Below the rifle the direction of the wire was changed so as to give a straight pull on the trigger.

The men went off to pack up, and while the sergeant made play to be the victim crossing over the tread the subaltern

adjusted the exact pull of the wire. This required some nicety of touch and considerable judgment, and it was a little time before the tension was right.

"Ready to move off, sergeant?"

"All ready, sir."

"Right. Give me the blank. You carry on, and get away as soon as you can."

The sergeant moved his hand towards his pocket, then hesitated and coughed.

"Hurry up, man," said the other.

"Did you get that rifle to work right, sir?"

"Oh yes; it's all right now."

Even if the sergeant had not hurriedly tried the thing himself several times when his senior was on the other side of the river, he would have seen through this prevarication. The subaltern was not a good liar.

"Beg pardon, sir—would you let me fix this one?"

"*You?* Nonsense, man! You get on with the convoy. I'm all right."

The sergeant turned round slowly and walked away.

“Give me the blank before you go.”

“They’re—in the waggon, sir. I sha’n’t be a minute.”

The officer stared at him suspiciously. It was unusual for this man not to have everything to hand up to time. Besides, he had at first moved his hand to his pocket. There was something behind all this. The sergeant was as clumsy at deception as his senior had been.

As soon as he got out of sight the sergeant pulled a bulletless cartridge from his pocket and hurriedly dug out its contents with a nail. He then ran back with overdone haste and handed over the empty case.

The subaltern took it and examined the cap with care. That was all right; it had not been fired. He then probed the case with a stem of grass. Finding that he could pass the grass right up to the base, he threw the shell away and, looking

the abashed and surprised sergeant in the face, held out his hand. The offence of which he suspected his subordinate was so serious that, without absolute proof, he decided to say nothing.

The two men looked at each other steadily. Without a word the sergeant handed over a second cartridge. This was inspected and sounded in the same way, and when the stem of grass was prevented from passing into the case by some solid substance, the officer scooped out a little of the stuff with a splinter and examined it. He then nodded. As the sergeant, still silent, again turned to go, the subaltern fumbled in his haversack.

“Hold hard—here’s the map. You’d better take it with you—in case—— There’s no chance of it, of course; but *if* you should hear the thing go off, and I don’t turn up, and you get back all right, go straight to headquarters and report that the ten fords are blocked, but that this one here—I’ll mark it big—number

eleven—which they don't know of, is not blocked—see?”

A nod was the only reply.

“Whatever you do, don't be caught or killed with this marked map on you. Have a good look at it now, so that you will be able to point out the place of this ford without the map, in case you have to destroy it. See here—this bit of the river's all that matters. I'll cut that out. If the worst comes to the worst you can chew up this small piece.” As he spoke he cut a strip out of the centre of the map. He then wrung the man's hand and, calling him by his name, said good-bye. “Now get a move on. There's no need to look so glum. I shall catch you up in twenty minutes.”

He watched the sergeant go up the bank, heard his word of command, heard the cavalcade move off. He appreciated the motive of the clumsy effort at deceit through which he had seen, and had no fear that the man had plugged the barrel

of the rifle or not placed its muzzle in the powder, for if he had done anything of the sort his trick with the cartridge at the last moment would not have been necessary. Picking his steps carefully so as to avoid the wire, whose course was buoy-marked by certain innocent-looking twigs, he again climbed up the slope and lay down on his stomach. He then deposited the blank cartridge on the ground to his right hand, placed his empty pipe between his teeth, and proceeded with his experiments.

III.

While the sergeant, filled with apprehension, continued on his way, the object of his solicitude lay spread-eagled on the bank of the river preparing for his throw of the die with death. After looking at the watch on his wrist he shut his eyes and went on with the operation of open-

ing and closing the lever, in which he had been interrupted. The rifle still acted in its former perverse manner, without giving any tangible clue to its irregularities; he was still unable to trace the slightest variation, either in the motion or the resistance of the breech action when opened, whatever happened afterwards. There was no more, and there was no less, stickiness or vibration when the lever was going to fire the weapon than when it was not. Remembering that moisture increases the sensibility of the skin, he sucked his thumb and forefinger, and after a time he thought he could distinguish some faint difference of the nature he was seeking in the pull. But, almost impalpable, it was too vague to be of any use for prognostication, and most of his forecasts as to the rifle's behaviour based on it were wrong. When one did happen to prove correct, he realised that it was by chance. Finally, all sensation had been so long concentrated in his finger

and thumb that his imagination began to play tricks; the curved metal of the lever felt as if it were something soft in his grasp, as if it were alive and contracting and expanding in drawing breath. So powerful was this impression that he involuntarily opened his eyes to look. His empty pipe being in the way, he took it from his mouth. And it was only when he felt the pipe-bowl itself palpitating in his grasp that he realised how strongly the pulse in the ball of the thumb can beat. It seemed hopeless. If his blood-vessels were throbbing in that manner, what confidence was to be placed in external sensations?

He had almost given up his efforts at rational investigation and determined to rely on blind chance, when a bird on a branch above his head warbled. The sound was an inspiration. There was one sense he had not tried—perhaps his ears would give him the secret!

Again settling himself down on his chest,

he placed his ear as close to the breech as possible. In doing this his foot slipped, his face was jerked forward on to the jagged, sawn-off butt of the rifle, and a splinter gashed his cheek. Unheeding, he dug his feet farther into the earth so as to get a better grip, again closed his eyes, and, barely breathing, began his games with the lever once more. Numberless sounds — up till now hardly noticed — all at once grew insistently loud and bewildering. The bird above him had flown away, but others twittered in the distance, and, in spite of the apparent lack of breeze, the top leaves of the trees were whispering. The volume of water in the river seemed to have increased, and its murmur over the shallows was now almost a roar. While the hum of insects was all-pervading and covered the whole gamut, the noise of those nearest sounded in his ears like bugle marches brayed out by gramophones. This medley of notes, in reality hardly audible, assumed un-

believable intensity to the ears straining to catch another and more subtle sound.

He continued his trials, at first slowly and gently. Then, finding that such slow, successive movements were too separate for minute differences of noise to be noted and compared, he changed his tactics. He took a deep breath and worked the lever up and down as fast and as often as he could, till the blood throbbed in his head, till the pounding of his heart against the solid earth almost lifted him and he was forced to exhale. After what seemed like many hours of this he gradually came to the conclusion that he could distinguish a minute difference in the faint grating noise of the lever as it oscillated. He could not have sworn to it, but the thing seemed to purr slightly upon its downward journey on those occasions when it did not fire the rifle upon its return to the closed position. By this time he was bathed in perspiration; his sleeves were full of sand, which stuck to his skin; and his face and

wrists were speckled with mosquitoes. The toe-nails of one foot were full of soil and almost bleeding. The bowl of his pipe and half the bitten-off stem lay some distance down the bank; the remainder was in splinters in his mouth. Below his chin the flies dodged and buzzed and wrangled over the dark patch formed on the soil by the blood dripping from his cheek. But of these trifles he was entirely unconscious.

He had not time to confirm his suspicions about the existence of this purring sound when he heard a rifle-shot. The single report was followed by several others. If the convoy were being attacked already there was no time to lose, and upon the next occasion when he thought that he heard the lever purr he made up his mind to act. He picked up the cartridge, blew off the grit, and pressed it carefully home into the chamber. As he did so the bright, undented copper cap in its base seemed to wink at him deris-

ively. There was now no longer need for him to keep his eyes shut in order to concentrate his mind, and, pausing for a moment, he gazed upwards. In spite of the blue sky above, he felt that he was now verily in the Valley, that the Shadow was closing over him.

Wondering if he should ford the next river he had to cross, or whether the old ferryman, Charon, would be waiting to take him over, he for the last time gripped the curved piece of metal.

Very gently he pressed it upwards. After an eternity there was a soft click, and the movement of the lever ceased.

When the subaltern realised that the rifle-shots were much closer, he did not seem to be perturbed by the fact. With a sob of relief he slid quietly down the bank. The eleventh ford was ready!

THE SENSE OF TOUCH

Yes, perhaps in some ways it may appear ludicrous. But on the whole the unpleasant side swamped the other, and in reality it was a ghastly experience. At all events, I have no wish to go through anything of the sort again. Once is enough. Why, I've hardly been able to sleep for bad dreams ever since. I'll tell you about it, since you insist, but I must do it in my own way, which means recalling the whole thing bit by bit as it occurred, and you'll have to listen to all sorts of unimportant details, for I'm not up to making an artistic story of it. But that will be an advantage, because you will be the better able to appreciate my mental state at the

time—how the affair appealed to me—and will not judge of it by the way it strikes you, sitting here safe in the club, in broad daylight, and in God's fresh air.

'Pon my word, I really don't know what made me go into the place. I've never been keen on cinemas. The ones I went to when they first came out quite choked me off. The jiggling of the pictures pulled my eyes out till they felt like a crab's, and the potted atmosphere made my head ache. I was strolling along, rather bored with things in general and more that a bit tired, and happened to stop as I passed the doors. It seemed just the ordinary picture palace or electric theatre show—ivory-enamelled portico, neuralgic blaze of flame arc-lights above, and underneath, in coloured incandescents, the words, "Mountains of Fun."

Fun! Good Lord!

An out-sized and over-uniformed tout, in dirty white gloves and a swagger stick, was strolling backwards and forwards, alternately shouting invitations to see the

“continuous performance” and chasing away the recurring clusters of eager-eyed children, whose outward appearance was not suggestive of the possession of the necessary entrance fee. There were highly-coloured posters on every available foot of wall - space — sensational scenes, in which cowboys, revolvers, and assorted deaths predominated—and across them were pasted strips of paper bearing the legend, “LIFE-REPRO Novelty This Evening.”

I confess that, old as I am, it was that expression which caught me — “LIFE-REPRO.” It sounded like a new metal polish or an ointment for “swellings on the leg,” but it had the true showman’s ring. I asked the janitor what it meant. Of course he did not know—poor devil—and only repeated his stock piece: “Splendid new novelty. Now showing. No waiting. Continuous performance. Walk right in.”

I was curious; it was just beginning to rain; and I decided to waste half an hour. No sooner had the metal disc—shot out

at me in exchange for sixpence—rattled on to the zinc counter of the ticket-window than the uniformed scoundrel thrust a handbill on me and almost shoved me through a curtained doorway. Quite suddenly I found myself in a dark room, the gloom of which was only accentuated by the picture quivering on a screen about fifty feet away. The change from the glare outside was confusing and the atmosphere smote me, and as I heard the door bang and the curtain being redrawn I felt half inclined to turn round and go out. But while I hesitated, not daring to move until my eyes got acclimatised, some one flashed an electric torch in my eyes, grabbed my ticket, and squeaked, "Straight along, please," then switched off the light.

Useful, wasn't it? I couldn't see an inch. You know, I'm not very touchy as a rule, but I was getting a bit nettled, and a good deal of my boredom had vanished. I groped my way carefully down what felt like an inclined gangway, now in total

darkness, for there was at the moment no picture on the screen, and at once stumbled down a step. A *step*, mind you, in the centre of a gangway, in a place of entertainment which is usually dark! I naturally threw out my hands to save myself and grabbed what I could. There was a scream, and the film then starting again, I discovered that I was clutching a lady by the hair. The whole thing gave me a jar and threw me into a perspiration,—you must remember I was still shaky after my illness. When, as I was apologising, the same, or another, fool with the torchlight flashed it at my waistcoat and said, “Mind the step,” I’m afraid I told him, as man to man, what I thought of him and the whole beastly show. I was now really annoyed, and showed it. I had no notion there were so many people in the hall until I heard the cries of “Sssh!” “Turn him out!” from all directions.

When I was finally led to a flap-up seat—which I nearly missed, by the way, in

the dark—I discovered the reason for the impatience evinced by the audience. I had butted in with my clatter and winged words at the critical moment of a touching scene. To the sound of soft, sad music, all on the black notes, the little incurable cripple che-ild in the tenement house was just being restored to health by watching the remarkably quick growth of the cow-slips given to her by the kind-hearted scavenger. Completely as boredom had been banished by the manner of my *entrée*, it quickly returned while I suffered the long-drawn convalescence of “Little Emmeline.” As soon as this harrowing film was over and the lights were raised I took my chance of looking round.

The hall was very much the usual sort of place—perhaps a bit smaller than most,—long and narrow, with a floor sloping down from the back. In front of the screen, which was a very large one, was an enclosed pit containing some artificial palms and tin hydrangeas, a piano and a

harmonium, and in the end wall at its right was a small door marked "Private." In the side wall on the left near the proscenium place was an exit. The only other means of egress, as far as I could see, was the doorway through which I had entered. Both of these were marked by illuminated glass signs, and on the walls were notices of "The management beg to thank those ladies who have so kindly removed their hats," and advertisement placards—mostly of chocolate. The decorations were too garish for the place to be exactly homely, but it was distinctly commonplace, a contrast to the shambles it became later on. What?

Yes! I daresay you know all about these picture palaces, but I've got to give you the points as they appealed to me. I'm not telling you a story, man. I'm simply trying to give you an exact account of what happened. It's the only way I can do it.

The ventilation was execrable, in spite

of the couple of exhaust fans buzzing round overhead, and the air hung stagnant and heavy with tobacco smoke, traces of stale scent, while wafts of peppermint, aniseed, and eucalyptus occasionally reached me from the seats in front. The place was fairly well filled, the audience consisting largely of women and children of the poorer classes—even babies in arms—just the sort of innocent holiday crowd that awful things always happen to.

By the time I had noticed this much the lights were lowered, and we were treated to a scene of war which converted my boredom into absolute depression. I must describe it to you, because you always will maintain that we are a military nation at heart. By Jove, we are! Even the attendants at this one-horse gaff were wearing uniforms. And the applause with which the jumble of sheer military impossibility and misplaced sentiment presented to us was greeted proves it. The story was called "Only a Bugler Boy."

The first scene represented a small detachment of British soldiers "At the Front" on "Active Service" in a savage country. News came in of the "foe." This was the occasion for a perfect orgy of mouthing, gesticulation, and salutation. How they saluted each other, usually with the wrong hand, without head-covering! And the actors were so keen to convey the military atmosphere that the officers, as often as not, acknowledged a salute before it was given.

After much consultation, deep breathing exercise, and making of goo-goo eyes, the long-haired rabbit who was in command selected a position for "defence to the death" so obviously unsuitable and suicidal that he should have been hamstrung at once by his round-shouldered gang of supers. But no! In striking attitudes they waited to be attacked at immense and quite unnecessary disadvantage by the savage horde. Then, amid noise and smoke, the commander endeavoured to atone for

the hopeless situation in which he had placed his luckless men by waving his sword and exposing himself to the enemy's bullets. I say "atone," for it would have been the only chance for his detachment if he had been killed, and killed quickly. Well, after some time and many casualties, it occurred to him that it would be as well to do something he should have done at first, and let the nearest friendly force know of his predicament. The diminutive bugler with the clean face and nicely-brushed hair was naturally chosen for this very dangerous mission, which even a grown man would have had a poor chance of carrying out, and after shaking hands all round, well in the open, the little hero started off with his written message.

Then followed a prolonged nightmare of crawling through the bush-studded desert.

Bugler stalked savage foe, and shot several with his revolver. Savage foe stalked bugler and wounded him in both arms and one leg. Finally, after squirm-

ing in accentuated and obvious agony for miles, bugler reached the nearest friendly force, staggered up to its commander, thrust his despatch upon him, and swooned in his arms. Occasion for more saluting, deep breathing, and gesticulation, and much keen gazing through field-glasses—notwithstanding the fact that if the beleaguered garrison were in sight the sound of the firing must have been heard long before! Then a trumpet-call on the harmonium, and away dashed the relief force of mounted men.

Meanwhile we were given a chance of seeing how badly things had been going with the devoted garrison at bay. It was only when they were at their last gasp and cartridge that the relief reached them. With waving of helmets and cheers from the defenders, the first two men of the relieving force hurled themselves over the improvised stockade. *You* know what they were? I knew what they must be long before they appeared. And it is hardly

necessary to specify to which branches of his Majesty's United Services they belonged. The sorely-wounded but miraculously tough bugler took the stockade in his stride, a very good third. He had apparently recovered sufficiently to gallop all the way back with the rescuers—only to faint again, this time in the arms of his own commanding officer. Curtain! "They all love Jack," an imitation of bagpipes on the harmonium, and "Rule Britannia" from the combined orchestra. As I say, this effort of realism was received with great applause, even by the men present.

As soon as the light went up I had a look at my neighbours. The seats on each side of me were empty, and in the row in front, about a couple of seats to my right, there was one occupant, a young fellow of the type of which one sees only too many in our large towns. He was round-shouldered and narrow-chested, and his pale thin face suggested hard work carried out in

insanitary surroundings and on unwholesome food. His expression was precocious, but the loose mouth showed that its owner was far too unintelligent to be more than feebly and unsuccessfully vicious. He wore a yachting cap well on the back of his head, and on it he sported a plush swallow or eagle—or some other bird—of that virulent but non-committal blue which is neither Oxford nor Cambridge. It was Boat-Race week. He was evidently out for pleasure—poor devil!—and from his incidental remarks, which were all of a quasi-sporting nature, I gathered that he was getting it. I felt sorry for him, and sympathised in his entire absorption in the strange scenes passing before his eyes—scenes of excitement and adventure far removed from the monotonous round of his squalid life. How much better an hour of such innocent amusement than time and money wasted in some boozing-ken—eh?

Well, I'm not quite sure what it means myself—some sort of a low drinking-den.

But, anyway, that's what I felt about it. After all, he was a harmless sort of chap, and his unsophisticated enjoyment made me envious. I took an interest in him—thought of giving him a bob or two when I went out. I want you to realise that I had nothing but kindly feelings towards the fellow.

Then we had one of those interminable scenes of chase in which a horseman flies for life towards you over endless stretches of plain and down the perspective of long vistas of forests, pursued at a discreet distance by other riders, who follow in his exact tracks, even to avoiding the same tree-stumps, all mounted on a breed of horse which does forty-five miles an hour across country and fifty along the hard high-road. I forget the cause of the pursuit and its ending, but I know revolvers were used.

The next film was French, and of the snowball type. A man runs down a street. He is at once chased by two policemen, one

long and thin and the other fat and bow-legged, with an obviously false stomach. The followers very rapidly increase in number to a mixed mob of fifty or more, including nurses with children in perambulators. They go round many corners, and round every corner there happens to be a carefully arranged obstacle which they all fall over in a kicking heap. I remember that soot and whitewash played an important part, also that the wheels of the passing vehicles went round the wrong way.

Owing to the interruption of light, was it? I daresay. Anyway, it was very annoying. Then we had a bit of the supernatural. I'm afraid I didn't notice what took place, so I'll spare you a description. I was entirely engrossed with the efforts of the wretched pianist to play *tremolo* for ten solid minutes. I think it was the ghost melody from "The Corsican Brothers" that she was struggling with, and the harmonium did not help one bit.

The execution got slower and slower and more *staccato* as her hands grew tired, and at the end I am sure she was jabbing the notes with her aching fingers straight and stiff. Poor girl! What a life!

At about this moment, as far as I remember, a lady came in and took the seat in front of mine. She was a small woman, and was wearing a microscopic bonnet composed of two strings and a sort of crêpe muffin. The expression of her face was the most perfect crystallisation of peevishness I've ever seen, and her hair was screwed up into a tight knob about the size and shape of a large snail-shell. Evidently not well off—probably a charwoman. I caught a glimpse of her gloves as she loosened her bonnet-strings, and the finger-tips were like the split buds of a black fuchsia just about to bloom. Shortly after she had taken her seat my friend with the Boat-Race favour suddenly felt hungry, cracked a nut between his

teeth, spat out the shell noisily, and ate the kernel with undisguised relish. The lady gathered her mantle round her and sniffed. I was not surprised. The brute continued to crack nuts, eject shells, and chew till he killed all my sympathy for him, till I began to loathe his unhealthy face, and longed for something to strike him dead. This was absolutely the limit, and I should have cleared out had not the words "LIFE-REPRO" on the handbill again caught my eye. After all it must come to that soon, and I determined to sit the thing out.

After one or two more films of a banal nature there was a special interval—called "Intermission" on the screen—and signs were not wanting of the approach of the main event of the show. Two of the youths had exchanged their electric torches for trays, and perambulated the gangways with cries of "Chuglit—milk chuglit." A third produced a large garden syringe and proceeded to squirt a fine spray into the

air. This hung about in a cloud, and made the room smell like a soap factory.

When the curtain-bell sounded the curtain was not drawn nor were the lights lowered. A man stepped out of the small door and climbed up on to the narrow ledge in front of the screen, which served as a kind of stage or platform, and much to my disgust made obvious preparation to address the audience. He was a bulky fellow, and his apparent solidity was increased by the cut of his coat. His square chin added to the sense of power conveyed by his build, while a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles gave him an air of seriousness and wisdom. I at once sized him up as a mountebank, and thought I knew what sort of showman's patter to expect. He did not waste much time before he got busy. Looking slowly all round the room, he fixed my sporting friend with a baleful glare until the latter stopped eating, then cleared his throat and began.

I think I can repeat most of his dis-

course almost word for word—it is nearly all printed on the handbill which I have since been studying. I can also give you his pronunciation and accent fairly well, but unluckily I cannot reproduce his manner nor his delivery. Just pass me the whisky—and the siphon, please—before I start. I haven't talked so much since I was ill. That's better.

Well, this is the gist of what he said :—

“Ladies and gentlemen, I will not detain you vurry long. Before the next item of the programme, I wish, as re-presentative of the pro-ducers, the Stegomeyer P. Fiske Life-Repro Syndicate of N'York City, to make you acquainted, in a few introductory words, with one or two facts. The next series of films that will show are the pro-ductions of the laboratory of that firm, and will—I venture to think—be something quite noo to you. In fa-act, as they have—never—until this evening—been exhibited in public, I may say that this pre-sentation is their dress rehearsal.

If they were ordinary films there would be no call for me to take up your valuable time, but, ladies and gentlemen, they are most extra-ordinary films, and it is to some special points of their extra-ordinary nature that I shall endeavour to draw your kind attention.

“In the first place, the productions of the Life-Repro Syndicate are all scientific and instructive in their character. They are, also, the vurry latest de-velopment of colour - photography in its most perfect form, and they pre-sent objects in their true natural colours. As projected in this auditorium—I should say, hall—this evening, the objects shown will be magnified anywheres from six to forty diameters. As far as the optical effect goes, we do claim that our films are su-perior to all others produced up to date, in definition, in *chiaroscuro*”—he took rather a toss over that word—“in the values and abso-lute truth of tint, and in entire absence of flicker. I might say that, for smooth running, our

pictures bear the same relation to anything you have yet seen that kummel trickling from a bottle does to the jet from a soda-fountain, or that a spin in an auto-mobile down your Bornd Street or Nor-thumberland Avenoo does to a ride in a spider over a corduroy road. So much for what we do for one sense—that of sight. Besides that sense, however, we cater, as many inventors have attempted to do, with more *or* less success, for the sense of hearing. By means of our automatic, self-registering, self-recording, synchronic, micro-mega-audiphonic booster, patented in sixteen different countries, we are able to give you, together with a feast for the eye, an ex-act reproduction of the sounds or noises which are appropriate to the ob-ject being viewed. With our equipment the register is perfect, the sound-record synchronises ab-solutely with the picture-record, and there is no race or struggle between the acoustic and optical pre-sentation.

“There is no accidental noise to distract,

for our machines run as silent as a skunk on velvet, while the sound which impinges upon the tympanum is magnified or diminished in volume and intensity in precisely the same proportion as the image projected on to the retina. Thus, if you should see in the picture a mouse about two feet in length—that is, magnified about twelve times—you will hear the animal squeak a dozen times as loudly as does the actual little rodent doing a Marathon behind the hard-wood skirting of your best parlour. That is two senses we cater for. But are we content? No! We also appeal to a third sense—that of smell!”

He paused for a moment, as if aware that this statement would produce an effect. There was some movement and whispering amongst the adults of the audience.

“I mean it, ladies and gentlemen. I am not presooming to be gay with you. I am simply handing out the cold truth! You will see; you will hear; you will smell! By means of our ‘odorator’—also patented

in sixteen countries—the natural scent appertaining to whatever is on the screen, and appropriately magnified in intensity, will be wafted over you with the pictures. There is no need for any alarm, ladies. There can be no danger of infection, for this is not a case of repro-duction—it is a matter of imitation. The real emanations are not caught, canned, and released. They are just cleverly imitated. This is one more triumph, and the latest, achieved by the science of synthetic chemistry. But though I can promise you that the odours you will perceive will be harmless, I cannot guarantee that they will all be pleasant. We must remember that our endeavour is to reproduce Nature as realistically as possible. Nature, ladies and gentlemen, is marvellous, kyurious, interesting, fascinating, cruel, even brutal, but rarely pleasant.”

He paused again to take a sip of water and polish his spectacles. And the remarkable thing was that the audience, which had not understood one-fifth of what had

been said, sat silent, attentive, and expectant. By his manner or personal magnetism—or whatever you may call it—the man had gripped a whole crowd of strange, mostly ill-educated, people. Besides being above the heads of the great majority of his hearers, what he had said might have been spoken by any clever “ad.” writer.

It was the man’s personality that did it. Even I felt his influence. Apparently impassive, he spoke deliberately and very clearly. His nationality was, of course obvious from his first few words, but the twang was almost imperceptible. The curious weighty pauses with which he punctuated his sentences, even his words, only served to add to the impressiveness of his delivery. I am by no means a believer in your “supermen,” but as this square-jawed, bull-necked, goggle-eyed fellow stood talking he seemed the embodiment of cold knowledge and brutal strength. I could have imagined him an inquisitor, a vivisector. His spectacles were of high magni-

fying power, and his eyes, looming huge through them, seemed compelling and malevolent. When the lenses caught and reflected the light in a blaze—why, talk of Charcot's revolving mirrors at the Salpêtrière, the effect was hypnotic! Though a good deal of what he said—especially the nonsense about the “odorator”—would ordinarily have made me smile, somehow it was not amusement that I then felt. I wanted to hear more—to see.

Even the nut-eater forbore to feed and fidgeted uneasily in his seat. And what could *he* have understood? The acid lady kept patting her back hair and muttering, “Well, I never! What next?” She could not have expressed my own feelings better if she had tried. The man put his handkerchief back into his pocket and spoke again.

“It is now up to me to prove my words, ladies and gentlemen, and in a moment I hope to do so. But first I wish to explain our title of ‘Life-Repro.’ As I say, as far

as four senses are concerned, we have solved the problem of the reproduction of life—sight, hearing, smell, and taste; I include the latter as it is so intimately bound up with smell. But one sense—that of touch—remains unsatisfied. And now, to leave accomplished facts and enter into the realms of anticipation”—his tone now grew more impressive—“I wish to state that it is the present aim of the Stegomeyer P. Fiske Syndicate to fill that gap in their appeal to the human intelligence and sensibilities, and to cater for the sense of touch. We have not yet succeeded, and I need hardly remind you of what that stage of perfection would imply, beyond saying that it will be a case of dealing in three dimensions instead of two. Though we have not got to it, there are now, in a certain laboratory on the island of Man-hattan—away on the other side—quite a number of the brightest intellects of the time working day and night to arrive at a solution. At their service they have all the re-sources of science, and behind

them they have the backing of unlimited capital. Millions of dollars are being spent, and millions more are, if necessary, at their disposal. It's a big proposition !

"No one can ever tell when an epoch-making discovery is going to be made. It is largely a matter of chance. Given the favourable conditions, we may stumble upon it by a lucky accident at any moment."

As he touched upon finance the man's plump hands slowly fluttered to the level of his shoulders like flat-fish swimming to the surface of the water in a tank. For the moment the spell was broken. He almost seemed to be persuading us to buy something "dirt sheap." He continued, in a more conversational tone :—

"This evening we are only pre-senting one film—a study in natural history portraying a life-and-death combat between two insects — a praying mantis and a scorpion. The mantis is not, as might be imagined from its popular name, a benevolent animal. It is the most ferocious creature

known to science, and might with justice be called the 'Thug' of the insect world. It scraps for pleasure, and kills from the lust of slaughter. Without any poison-fangs or sting, it slays its victims by crushing them to death with its huge spiked fore-legs. The actual specimen whose actions you will be able to study was obtained from the mahogany forests of Honduras, where these insects reach an immense size. It is a female, which—in the case of this insect only, ladies—is the more ferocious sex. The particular scorpion with which it fights was caught by A-rabs in the Sokoto Desert. The venom of the scorpion is well known to produce the most intense pain in the world. This African variety has, on several authenticated occasions, caused the death of human beings.

"I will not give the show away by telling you now which wins the battle. But I warnt you to observe one peculiarity of both these insects—so long as there is no movement to attract their attention they

are sluggish and passive ; so soon, however, as one moves, he trips up on a live wire, and gets it in the neck good and plenty. Then, unless he side-steps pretty nimble, it's a cinch for little Eustace !”

The speaker's sporting instincts had evidently got the better of him—his last words were a bit of a relapse ! With a bow he stepped down from the platform and switched off the lights, and the following announcement was at once thrown upon the screen in flame-coloured letters :—

MANTIS RELIGIOSA v. SCORPIO AFER.

“A TRAGEDY OF THE WILD.

“I.—*Reconnaissance.*”

There followed a marvellously-coloured picture of a patch of earth and stones, to the right of which were some dried-up twigs. It was in such bright sunlight that the glare even of this sober-coloured earth was almost dazzling, and the shadows of the twigs cut it with bars of black. The

man had said no more than the truth about his "pro-ductions." There was only the most minute quiver to show the movement of the film ; and, in contrast to the previous rattle, the projecting mechanism worked without even a buzz. It really was remarkable. However, for some moments I could not discern the slightest sign of life. Then I did discover among the stones on the left the form of a scorpion. It was very much the tint of its background, and was clinging to the ground with tail stretched out, so flat that there was no shadow to betray its position. On all sides I heard whispers : "I carn't see anything. Where are they ?" "There he is by the stones." "That's the mantis, ain't it?" "No, that's the scorpion." "Well, where is 'afer' then ?" There were also subdued noises of disgust and many little shrieks from the feminine portion of the audience.

As the remarks grew louder the showman, who was standing by the door on one side of the stage, intervened :—

“Ladies and gentlemen, please do not talk or make any noise, or you will not be able to hear the insects, and a large part of the illusion will be lost.”

The whispering ceased ; but there were slight movements and rustlings which I felt were born of horror and repulsion, and I was sure that many of the girls were trying to curl their feet up on to their seats. I sympathised. I loathe creeping things-myself. For a little time nothing happened. The scorpion lay quite still, sunning himself amongst the dust and stones, as magnified about nine feet away from the collection of twigs. Suddenly he either moved a leg or wriggled, for I saw a pebble slip and heard it rattle. And at that instant one of the thickest of the twigs flipped away from the rest and appeared about two feet from the scorpion. I say “appeared,” because its motion across the intervening space was too quick to follow. At one moment one of the bunch of twigs, the next it was half-standing on

end facing the scorpion, with its arms or fore-legs folded in front of it.

I then appreciated the name of "praying mantis." It was browny-green in colour, and its appearance was so benign, not to say devout, that it was difficult to believe what the lecturer had said about its true character. Indeed, as opposed to its enemy, the mantis actually attracted sympathy; it suggested a benign, if foolish, temperament. The scorpion, from being passively repulsive, had changed to an embodiment of venomous malice. It gave the disagreeable impression of a monstrosity or deformity, and yet it was not easy to say exactly to what this was due. Murder was clearly expressed in every line of its body, in the curve of its tail, in the gape of its half-open claws. It was truly horrible, and a child in a front seat wailed out: "Take it away, mummie; I don't like it."

I don't know whether it really was so, or whether my imagination was playing

me tricks, but at that instant there seemed to be a glimmer of light round the two insects, and they appeared to turn their heads towards the body of the hall. If this really did happen it was over in the fraction of a second; but I was more startled than I cared to confess to myself, and I rubbed my eyes. I noticed also that a musty smell had now replaced the variegated odours in the hall. It was faint, but distinctly unpleasant. When the film ended, a few moments later, with both insects still on the watch, subdued sighs of relief arose from all parts of the hall. The nut-eater murmured "Time," in an effort at jocularly; but even his tone rang false. One or two sensible women took their children out of the hall.

Before the announcement of the next scene was given us the showman's voice again rang out: "So far the camera has been at some distance from the insects, and their peculiar odour has not been

vurry marked. You will now see the combatants at much closer range, and will get the full value of the odorator."

In scene two, which was labelled "Contact," the insects had approached quite close and were immensely magnified. I should say at a guess that they were each about six feet long. The mantis was now standing erect on her four thin hind-legs, with the end of her body curled upwards, while her two massive armed fore-legs, serrated, or rather, set with long spikes, were stretched on in front above her head. Though almost ludicrous, she was as terrifying as some absurd monster in a nightmare. Her flat, inadequate, triangular head on its long neck was furnished with two large projecting eyes set at the upper corners, and at this close range these dull orbs could be seen to be fixed in a pompous but baleful glare of stupid ferocity. There was more than a hint of the "wolf in sheep's clothing" in their expression. Tremulously waving above were two slender antennæ.

There was no animal grace in the beast's attitude. It suggested the angular clumsiness of a girder or agricultural machinery, or an iron garden seat.

Not two feet from her face—on the picture—was the vicious sting of the scorpion poised over his head ready to strike, like a semi-transparent calabash with its stalk pointing forward. He was quivering with rage, and his gigantic lobster claws were wide open. I now saw what it was that gave this beast its air of morbid grotesqueness. It was deformed. Its body did not end in a decent head and face like that of a lobster, as one might have expected; it ended square at the shoulders, as if it had been sawn off. And all along this sawn-off edge shone eyes—lots of eyes—perhaps six or eight—no two of which seemed to look in the same direction. This manifold and compound squint was painful, and made my aching eyes water in sympathy. A feeling of nausea crept over me, increased by the stench

which now pervaded the air. I can't tell you what it was like. It suggested cockroaches, a hyena's cage, and oil gas. What with the smell and the heat, I really began to feel quite faint and drowsy.

So far there had been no movement between the combatants, and there had been no sound except the ejaculations of the hypnotised and semi-asphyxiated crowd.

Suddenly the scorpion made a jump, seized one hind-leg of its enemy with its claw, and darted its sting forward. With the quickness of thought the mantis dodged and brought its two thighs together in an endeavour to catch its enemy. But it was too late; the scorpion had backed just out of reach. As the feet of the beasts scrambled amongst the stones—about the size of my head—it sounded like men scuffling on a beach of large pebbles.

Disagreeable as the spectacle was, it was certainly exciting, and I could not take my eyes off the monstrous brutes. They again

stood watching. They were still for so long that I was wondering if they had gone to sleep, when I noticed from the absence of any tremor in the picture that the film was not moving. I then heard at the back of the hall the tapping of some tool upon metal, and came to the conclusion that one of the spools must have stuck or that something had gone wrong with the projecting mechanism. But it seemed to me somehow that though the film itself was stationary, there was a curious sparkling efflorescence about the outline of the insects. Perhaps the atmosphere was affecting me. The audience got a bit restive, and began to whisper and fidget. The nut-eater ejaculated, "Time, Archibald! Blow the whistle, ref!" and started to eat nuts again. A child in the front cried. Whether it was the same infant that had protested before I don't know. But the woman with it began to dance it up and down.

Then it happened!

The sparkle round the outline of the

monsters in the picture changed all at once to a definite prismatic halo, and with a crackling noise each insect deliberately turned its head towards the woman and child. Then, before you could have whistled, they were out of the picture, scrambling over the little well where the orchestra had previously been playing. I heard horny feet scratching over the polished top of the piano, and a great discordant *arpeggio* struck on the bass notes. It was all so quick that I'm not sure in what order things occurred. A sort of collective groan arose from the audience, but, paralysed by the suddenness of the thing, no one moved. The beasts clambered over the partition, and while the mantis darted up the gangway to the back of the room, the scorpion pounced on the woman with the baby. In the dark I could not see what it did, but shrieks of mortal agony at once drowned the feeble cries of the child. A panic then began, and every one got up. It was a hopeless situation, for the mantis was near

one entrance and the scorpion guarded the other. I could just see the beast seize on some one in the front row who had shrunk back from it, and then there were more horrible screams. I don't know what would have happened in the dark, but at that instant there was a shout from the American, who at any rate was a brave man:—

“My God! It's happened. Sit still. It's your only chance.”

He then moved to a switch close by and turned on the lights. In doing so he caught the eye of the scorpion, who made a dart for him. He just had time to rush into the little doorway near the stage and bang the door in the face of the beast. Its great claw missed him by six inches, sheared off the brass door-handle, crushed it like lead-foil. It then turned and faced the room, waiting for some one else to move. By this time the screams of the woman and baby and of the other victim had died away, and they already lay rigid. When you think of it, the speed with which the

poison had acted is not so wonderful after all. I daresay half a pint of venom had been injected into the veins of each person. The rest of us had had our lesson, and we sat motionless, silent, hardly daring to breathe. What the mantis was doing behind I don't know. I dursten't look.

Well, this awful suspense seemed to last for a long time. Two more people—women—got hysterical from the strain. They tittered, moved, attracted attention, were at once seized and stung, and died in convulsions—in the full glare of the electric light—before our very eyes. Occasional cries from the upper end of the hall showed that the mantis was not idle. I wondered how long this horrible one-sided stalemate would continue. Would the creatures be drawn back on to the screen if the film started moving again? I heard no more of the hammering noise up by the projector, but I prayed that the mechanism might be repaired speedily. I also prayed that the American had gone out to fetch assistance,

and would shortly return with police, armed men, or even the fire-brigade. And I wondered if the pressure of water at the average hydrant was enough to cope with these monsters.

Then the nut-eater met his doom. Like the rest of us he had sat still and silent, breathing hard; he had not even eaten the nut which he had started to convey to his mouth. But the poor devil was hoist by his own petard, for he put one of his feet on a nutshell. It was enough; the scorpion was on to him like a tiger. The way that the youth met the crisis of his life was pitiable. He made no rational resistance. He did not accept his fate in dignified silence, nor did he mark the special occasion with any exclamation of despair. He simply put his hands over his head like a small boy about to be cuffed, and, ineffective to the end, whined out to this pitiless armoured monster: "'Old 'ard! 'Ere, 'old 'ard!"

The scorpion gripped his arms with its

claws and stung him on the right side of the neck near the jugular vein. I saw the curved sting enter the flesh just above the silk neckerchief, and then come out all covered with blood. The youth shrieked with pain and writhed; his neck swelled, became bloated and shining; his attitude stiffened, and his head dropped forward.

The poor little drab lady must have subsided on to the floor some time before this. There was no sign of her above the back of her chair; and I was the next person to the scorpion, who still hung on to the body of the nut-eater and rolled his eyes successively round the room. Faint and sick as I felt, a desire for revenge seized me and overcame all other sensations. I noticed something like a pointed mahogany table-leg between the red plush "flap-up" of the seat just in front of me and its back. It was one of the brute's legs! An inspiration struck me. By sacrificing myself I might save perhaps half the roomful of women and

children, since the mantis alone could not guard two doors. If I did nothing we should all be killed in turn—I being the first.

Summoning all my strength, I braced myself in my seat, planted my foot firmly against the scorpion's leg, and pressed it with all my force against the edge of the seat. I felt the smooth, shining leg sink into the plush, and for one dreadful instant thought that I hadn't got a grip—that it was going to slip. Thank Heaven, I was wearing my golfing brogues with nails! The leg moved round slightly beneath my foot, then I felt it grate against the nails, which bit into the flesh, or horn, or whatever it was. I was holding it! I then yelled out: "All get out of the front door—quick!"

I heard a sort of scrimmage round me. I imagine that the people in front were trying to escape before the mantis could reach them; but I don't really know what did happen. I was fully employed with

my own affairs. Wrenching and tugging at its leg, the scorpion sprawled over the body of the dead youth and seized my left arm in one claw. It was painful, but all my thoughts and energy were so concentrated on keeping up the pressure of my leg that I did not much notice it. As the brute stretched forward it tried to reach me with its sting. Not being able to do so, it made immense efforts to pull me closer; but, luckily, I had my left arm twined round the arm of the seat. The strain was awful, and the perspiration poured down my forehead, for I was in rank bad condition. As we struggled my one prayer was that my foot would not slip; that the scorpion's leg would not tear or be pulled out of its socket; that the seat would not break.

In front, and quite close to me, was the unspeakable apology for a head, and the beast's breath—foul as an alligator's—came into my face in hot, fetid puffs. But it was the sting which fascinated me. Like a gigantic yellow pear-drop it quivered

not a foot from my neck, its point dripping venom and smeared with blood for at least three inches. And in the central duct I could see the poison as plain as the nicotine in the amber mouthpiece of this pipe. As the beast made efforts to reach me I felt it strain, and saw the venom in its sting pulsate up and down like water dancing in a gauge-glass. My right arm being free, I lunged at its squinting eyes with my umbrella. I think I must have put out two or three. At any rate I broke the creature's shell. It smashed like a crab's, and a horrid, creamy substance oozed out. As I worked the umbrella about to enlarge the wound, the beast seemed to feel the pain. It groaned, quivered all over, tightened its grip on my left arm, and got its sting to within six inches of my throat. It crushed my arm till I almost screamed.

.
“Come on, mister! What's the game?
We carn't 'ave this row 'ere.”

One of the attendants was shaking me by the arm; the lights were up; the piano and harmonium were having the usual ding-dong race; and there was no scorpion! I rubbed my eyes. The peevish lady, now hatless, was regarding me over her shoulder with considerable disfavour.

"*I dunno what the gentleman wants, I'm shewer. I took me bonnet orf the first time 'e kicked me—not that me *matinée* 'at could 'ave done 'im much 'arm.*"

"Where has it gone? I mean, what's the matter?" I gasped.

"W'y, you've been asleep for the last ten minutes, and 'ave been carryin' on a fair treat. Won't do, yer know—not in *this* 'all."

Perspiring, dazed, and trembling, I put my hand to my pocket to get out my watch.

It had gone.

So had the nut-eater!

SOME ROCKETS, "MOTHER," AND PRIVATE RILEY

"... OLIM MEMINISSE JUVABIT"

I.

"The sun went down, nor ceased the carnage there ;
Tumultuous Murder shook the midnight air."

—THOMAS CAMPBELL.

"CHUCK IT. It's no use. Lum'me if I can count the pips or even tell a Jack from 'is Majesty by this light, let alone spot old Mossy Face from the ace-piece which you spilled your corfy over in Bloomfontyne. The one o' diamonds wasn't it?"

"Ace o' hearts, old son ! Sweethearts—what you and me haven't got any use for now," replied the dealer, who was holding a very dog's-eared pack of cards. "It's a potted meat sort of life this. No gals, no

'lectric light—not even a bloomin' dip—and no enemy; only rumours. Might as well be in one of them new submarines. Yes, I s'pose we must turn down our gamble and, if the Bojers don't turn up, turn into our flea-bags! That makes three and seven you owes me, old pal. It'll be a dollar soon." The speaker got up, stretched, and carefully stowed away the "book" of cards on the sill of one of the little windows of the room through which the glow of the sunset still streamed feebly. He looked out.

"They don't get any ruddy sunsets like that in a submarine, though. It's a fair treat." Then peeping through another orifice he added wistfully, "My! Don't them little white cups on the telegraph-posts remind me of the lamps down Oxford Street? Something sickenin'." He turned round to the five others in the room. One yawned in reply.

The men were in a small one-roomed hut or rabbit-hutch. It was octagonal in shape with a pointed roof, and had two diminutive

tive windows at about breast-height from the floor in seven of its eight walls. The walls, each about three feet long, were composed of a double skin of naked, uncompromising corrugated iron. The intervening space was filled with no brick or stone wall, woodwork or concrete. It contained common, loose shingle, such as might have been gathered on most beaches in England. There were even holes left in the iron skin through which more shingle could be unromantically tipped in as the old stuff was shaken down by the vibration of passing trains, or by bullets. Though easily stopped by a few inches thickness of small stones, bullets cause considerable displacement amongst them. And these walls would possibly be a target for many such missiles, for the little hut nestling in the centre of a spider's web of barbed wire, and ringed round by a deep outer trench, was a tin blockhouse on the Jakhal's Vlei-Bosjeman's Kraal section of the main line of the railway. Its number — No. 342 $\frac{1}{2}$ — was its official designation, and showed its distance

in miles from the coast; while the legend "SAVELOY HOTEL" chalked underneath was a guarantee of the nature of the accommodation provided.

The diminutive windows were loopholes. There were thus fourteen loopholes for seven rifles including the sergeant.

Just past the blockhouse, almost due north and south ran the railway, also enclosed in barbed wire. The rails vanished in a point on the straight towards the north, and in the other direction curved round till they were lost behind a slight rise. Except in the immediate vicinity of "No. 342 $\frac{1}{2}$ " the only sign of life in the dreary landscape was the squat grey excrescence on this hill three-quarters of a mile away—No. 341 $\frac{3}{4}$ blockhouse. Everywhere else the grey veld and blue hills melted into the pink and pearly sky. The sun had just set—in fact, the contracting metals were still clicking in the chill, and there was just enough light to show up the utter desolation of the landscape. In one way the presence of a railway lessened the

sense of loneliness conveyed by the scene : it certainly was a connecting link with such hubs of civilisation and centres of movement as the entrenched camps at Bosje-man's Kraal and Jakhal's Vlei. On the other hand, these gleaming ribbons of steel, which ran so far away in either direction, seemed to desert the little tin hutch left behind in the waste—to accentuate its solitude.

Now halting to peer through field-glasses into the rapidly growing dusk, now continuing his prowling round the trench, was the sentry. He did not march on his beat with the smartness demanded in barrack life, but there was no listlessness about his movements or in his scrutiny of the fading landscape. He was obviously on the *qui vive*, as was the dirty, long-haired mongrel which, walking on the parapet of the trench, followed him round and stood at gaze when he did.

Close by, insolently conspicuous and unnaturally still, was the dummy sentry. Countenanced by authority in order to

draw the bullet of the lurking sniper, it was in reality more efficient as a collector of fuel. Only twenty yards from the rails, its very attitude was so suggestive of Aunt Sally that no self-respecting railway fireman, seeing the notice that was erected whenever a train approached, could resist wasting good Witbank coal. The notice consisted of a loose sheet of corrugated iron, on which was hand-printed large in chalk, "BOWL UP FOR THE MILKY ONES."

The man who lusted after the flesh-pots of the West End sat down amongst his unresponsive comrades with a grunt, muttering "Submarine! Submarine in a pot of blooming ink. *They've* got the 'lectric light."

"Talking of submarines," replied the student of the party, "reminds me of a bit I saw in the paper they chucked out of the mail this morning."

"Yes! We none of us seen that paper, only you. What'ch you done with it, Charlie? Ate it?"

"Never finished reading it myself. I 'appened to lay it down a moment, to light a fag, and a dust devil come along all of a sudden and blew it away."

"Didn't you weight it down, fathead?"

"So I did—with an empty milk tin. But the blighted wind rolled the tin off and pinched me noospaper. It got caught up in the entanglement for 'arf a mo'; and just when I climbed up to it, it tore in bits and sailed across the veld; and there were two murders I had not so much as run me eye over. Ripped me pants, too, in that blarsted entanglement. Strange thing 'ow difficult it is to get through them barbs without——"

"Oh, chuck the barbs. We know all about them. Wot about the submarines? I've 'eard that they're experimenting with them. Nasty things! I wouldn't stop on one for a lot."

"Well, it said that they kep' white mice aboard of 'em."

"White rats!" was the obvious chorus.

"Wot they want to keep white mice or any mice aboard for?" added the knowing man of the party, one Riley. "That reporter must a' seen you coming."

Private Albert Riley, otherwise known as the "Pull-through" on account of his thick red hair, was not a popular character. He had one good point—he could shoot well. But he never let any one forget the fact, and he made the great but very common mistake of assuming that because he was blessed with a straight eye he was therefore a fine fellow all round. Besides posing as a sportsman—much abused word—he considered himself to be what would nowadays be termed the "nut" of his company, if not of his battalion. This conviction found outward expression in always laying down the law in an unpleasant manner, in wearing his cap on the back of his head and his hair as long as he dared, and in usually having a half-burnt and unlighted cigarette hanging from his lip.

"I dunno about that. It's the truth I'm

telling you, leastwise there it was in print. The little stinkers 'ave a 'oly 'orror of that stuff they carry aboard, which is always leakin' and causin' them explosions."

"Wot do the mice do with it? Mop it up?"

"Not so much of it, Pull-through. When this stuff leaks it lies low, bein' 'eavy. The mice get it in the neck first and squeak or die, or something of that, and this gives the office to the crew. 'They're kep' on the floor of a purpose to smell the stuff—gaserlin, I think they call it."

"Tell us another. Vaserline ain't dangerous. Why, that's wot Pull-through always puts on 'is 'air when he walks out."

Riley bridled in the gloom and complacently stroked the "quiff" of red hair jutting over one eye. This still survived the assaults of the horse-clippers, and stood out rebellious and wild for lack of unguent, having quite lost its old cowlicked appearance.

"'Oo said vaserline. I said gaserline. That's the word I used."

"Well, wot is gaserline anyway?"

"It's the stuff they drives the engine with—same as petrol, what they 'ave to drive them motor-cars which the Frenchies use now instead of the gelatine to kill people with."

"You set there and mean to tell us that they keeps mice runnin' all over the floor! They must start a voyage with a tidy magazine full o' mice. Why, the crew would be sliding about on 'em, and the casualty list 'ud be sickenin'. Next, please."

"You're too sharp, old son. I never said they was loose. They're kep' in a cage."

"So are we! All I know is, that I wish we had one or two mice in with us. I'm not partial to a mouse myself, but we might tame the little blighter."

"'E wouldn't 'ave 'arf a chance. Smuttie would skoff 'im straight off."

"Smuts," also known as "The Commandant," was the detachment hound now with the sentry, which had been picked up somehow and somewhere, named after a prominent foe, and kept as a watch-dog. To sharpen his wits at night, he was fed only in the morning.

"Not 'im. The Commandant ain't a sporting breed. A mutton chop's about the only thing 'e'd put up a round with."

"I dunno so much about that. I wouldn't trust 'im with a mouse as I loved."

"Anyway, a little rattin' or a match for a purse and a belt between the tripe-'ound and a white mouse would liven us up a bit. A pity that we 'aven't got the Puddler and Jimmie still."

"The Puddler," a pasty and neurotic specimen of the genus *Scorpio*, and "Jimmie Nappy," one of a sort of poor relation to the tarantula, both now defunct, had formerly afforded some of the sportsmen of the company considerable

amusement. They had been matched daily for small wagers in a catch-as-catch-can, knock-down and drag-out fight, and had finally succumbed either to injuries received in action, the aromatic atmosphere of their lodgings — cigarette tins, or to a diet of bully-beef. The present locality of the detachment did not furnish further specimens.

"Yes. D'you remember that Sunday mornin' when Jimmie got a 'alf-Nelson on the Puddler, and old Puddler 'ooked him twice on the j——?"

"It was a foul! A blooming foul under any rules yer like—Queensberry, Cumberland, or——"

The discussion was cut short by the dead rattle of a cracked telephone bell. The sergeant jumped up to answer. He was a bad man at the end of a telephone, which was an instrument he did not understand. But in a blockhouse a "non-com." has not many privileges. To operate the telephone was one, and the sergeant re-

sented the superior knowledge of any one else. After a short conversation, consisting mostly of "Whats," he repeated the word "Four" several times in an unnecessarily loud tone *crescendo*, till he was shouting.

"What's that, Sergeant?" was the query from his command.

"Oh, it's only some fool at the other end worriting about how many boxes of ammunition we've got. What's the sense of asking now? They couldn't send out more if we hadn't a round between us. I said 'Four' as plain as a man could speak. He keeps saying 'What,' and then tells me not to shout or I'll fuse the wire! I know 'is voice. It's that lance - Jack of the Engineers. He gets too big for 'is boots by a darned sight at the fur end of a wire. I'll settle him when we get back to headquarters. Worriting now! Why, if we're for it to-night, we're for it, ammunition or no ammunition!" He continued muttering for some

time, then, looking at his watch, remembered that there were duties to be performed. "It's about dark now. Put up the fireworks, 'Arris. Whybrow, load the poopers."

One of the many instructions contained in the hektographed sheet of "Orders for Blockhouses" pasted on to a board, hanging up on the wall, was one concerning rockets, those invaluable alternatives to the telephone — invaluable because they could not be cut by an enemy. This order was to the effect that all rockets must be placed ready for firing before dusk — a wise regulation, for both light and calmness were needed to do this properly. Two rockets had to be placed in the wire loops outside the wall near the roof. They could be put in position and ignited through a small window in the corrugated iron above the heads of the garrison, which also served for lamp-signalling to the next blockhouse.

The code of signals was not complicated. One rocket signified that the enemy were

present and were being engaged. Two were a request for help, or, in the cheerful language of our abandoned soldiery, the call for "Mother to come quick." On all railway blockhouse lines "Mother" was an armoured train.

The "poopers" were a small battery of spring guns firing along the railway fence. They were connected to a continuous wire running from one blockhouse to the next, and were loaded every evening so soon as the sun had set long enough for the wire to have ceased contracting.

While Harris, standing on the end of a packing-case, was endeavouring to carry out orders, the sergeant went outside to consult with the sentry, and conversation died away. This preparation for the worst, or best, again reminded the detachment that there might at last be "something doing" after many weeks of weary waiting, and every man was absorbed in thought. The temporary silence was only broken by the whispered conversation outside, and the

dreary hum of the telegraph wires in the breeze.

It was a curious existence that the thousands of men garrisoning the block-house lines were leading. Though the sedentary life was at first a relief and a rest after the futile foot-slogging against a mounted enemy, yet it was, in the words of the gambler, a potted-meat sort of life, morally and physically. Tied to one spot for weeks, sometimes for months, the men got to know by sight every stick and stone within their range of vision, and when they were situated on the veld, every crease and wrinkle in the vast circle of horizon of which they were the centre. For those who happened to be dumped down on guard in some desolate spot in the hill country the outlook was in many cases more circumscribed but not more cheerful. The monotony of things was deadening, and in this respect the detachments might have been ancient mariners divided up into squads. Every day the

same sun popped up the same side, blazed across the sky and sank on the opposite side. In the words of the poet of the veld, theirs it was "To sit—and wait—and watch the cloud ships roll——"

The detachments along the railway, however, were certainly better off than those which stretched away across the veld into the distance. Besides enjoying the daily visit of the officer and the occasional call of the ration convoy or train—common to all blockhouses that were not forgotten—which stopped just long enough to fill up water-tanks, these men were lucky in the propinquity of the traffic along the main arteries of communication. Frequent trains of supplies going north, and of empties coming south, and long troop specials crowded with horses and khaki-clad men of known and unknown units, passed by them. It is true that very few stopped, but they were links with the world beyond; and during daylight there was always time for the ready chaff or the readier lump of

coal. The event of the day was the passage of the mail train laden with passengers, amongst whom were many returning refugees for the "Reef City." Dubbed by scoffers "The Flying Semite," partly because of its fierce average speed of eighteen miles an hour, partly on account of the luxuriousness of its real passenger coaches, and largely on account of the supposed race of those occupying them, the mail train was a genuine godsend to the sojourners by the railway side. Like the tattered Arab children who, with palms outstretched for baksheesh towards the passing vessel, line the banks of the Suez Canal, did the soldiers, often in somewhat similar garb, collect along the permanent way when the whistle of the Semite was heard and beg pathetically for literature or newspapers. And not often did they plead in vain. A tightly-folded white parcel would shoot out of a window, open in its flight, and flutter down outspread—a newspaper, a feast of wit and wisdom, truth and fiction, which

would be read from leader to "ad," discussed till it was in rags, and then carefully folded up either to exchange with the next detachment when the officer came his rounds, or furtively to cork up a loophole on the windward side of the blockhouse.

By these presents were our men kept in touch with home; and they were comforted, far away in their little tin and wire lairs under the Southern Cross, by the feeling that they were remembered, and that the Old Country was ringing with their deeds. If there was not much in the daily journals directly about their war, there was a good deal about cognate matters, such as the effect of the new googlie service in mixed ping-pong or the dastardly attempt being made by foreigners to introduce unfair and weird implements into the Royal and Ancient game. Both golf and ping-pong, however, being sports, are of course a sort of war. Our soldiery could also ascertain who were the latest arrivals "in town," and were able to read whom pre-

cisely Lady Algie Bulgie was cheering when she was seen looking "cheery" in Bond Street. All of this showed that they had not been forgotten. Besides, there was always the police intelligence.

But behind this surface excitement lay the sensation of being permanently on guard. Though the acuteness of this feeling very soon wore off when days and nights passed and nothing happened, it was always latent, in the background, and told on temper and nerves. One result of this was the many attacks of "jumps" and the frequent paroxysms of shooting that took place after dark. These again, like the cry of "wolf" repeated too often, led to apathy, to the fact that the sound of distant firing at night was generally assumed to be the sign of a false alarm until it was proved to the contrary. The tension manifested itself in various ways. There was "skyline" fever, which was specially strong in kopje country, and led to many aberrations, one of which was the historic

order that men on picquet duty were "strictly forbidden to strike matches on the skyline." Physically, also, the life told. The diet was monotonous; the water, perforce stored out of bullet's reach in iron tanks under the floor and boiled as required, became flat and unprofitable; and the lack of exercise and the stuffiness of the sleeping quarters led to staleness. Windows were numerous, but they were small and high up, and gales which were strong enough to raise earache-producing draughts at breast-height did not disturb the air near floor-level. And by one of the most stringent commandments in the block-house decalogue the sentry was the only man allowed to be outside at night. As succinctly expressed in another official command—possibly framed by the master of the art of saying exactly what is meant already quoted,—no man of a detachment was to sleep outside the blockhouse "except the *sentry on duty*."

There was not much variety in the

fauna of that portion of South Africa where the war raged, and so little animal life was usually visible that the movements of any beast that did appear were studied with interest. The occasional ant-bear, and the frequent *aasvogel* wheeling lazily in the blue sky, were acquaintances—the latter an unwelcome one. But the little *meerkats*, which popped up out of their holes and begged, the conies, and the graceful fork-tailed *zakka bulus* whistling and tumbling head over heels as they flew, became old friends. Thomas Atkins, always a lover of animals, during the South African War became a student of wild life and tried to make a pet of every beast that "rolled up," from ostriches to spiders. For his comfort it was lucky that musk-rats, civet-cats, and skunks were not indigenous to the sub-continent.

He, Atkins, is also a philosopher who, behind a deceptive mask of grousing, really makes the best of things more successfully than most men. Amongst

any band of soldiers, however small, there are usually one or two who have sufficient of that saving sense of humour to extract comfort from the most unpromising circumstances. Often, very often, has the gloom of some desperately serious situation been relieved by the caustic commentary or apt remark jerked out between passing bullets from behind one boulder to another. If our men were to lose this asset, for it is a great asset, the outlook for our small battalions would indeed be dark.

Thus, though the irresponsible conversation of the members of the garrison of "No. 342 $\frac{1}{2}$ " gave no signs of the fact, this evening was likely to be an epoch in their monotonous existence. And they knew it. A small but important organised drive was near its culmination. A specially pernicious commando, which had been definitely located in the angle of country enclosed between the two convergent lines of the railway running up from Bosjeman's Kraal to Jakhal's Vlei on the east and

the river on the west, was gradually being driven into the apex of the angle where the railway met and crossed the river. At this spot was Jakhal's Vlei—the metropolis of these parts. Both boundaries of this enclosed area were strongly guarded in order to prevent the enemy breaking out of the net. Every drift or possible crossing-place on the river was defended and held in force, while a chain of block-houses connected by barbed wire stretched right along the railway, up and down which cruised armoured trains. The quarry had beyond doubt been marked down in the area, the driving force was large and well organised, and the boundaries of the net were strong. Everything depended on the vigilance of the lines of posts and blockhouses in observing and preventing any effort to cross on the part of the enemy until the driving force closed with them. Hopes of success on this occasion were all the keener on account of previous failures, and woe to any detachment that

made a mistake and so allowed the commando to break away. The drive had now been going on for three days, and if any efforts to break out were going to be made they must be made during this night. Everything was ready; no more could be done; and on the lines the operation had been discussed till the men were tired of talking of it; but there was much determination and some anxiety. "No. 342 $\frac{1}{2}$ " was near the apex—the end of the drive—and as the days passed and the beaters got farther north without news being received of the capture of the prey, or of its escape, the tension increased. No chances were going to be taken, and any living thing, enemy, neutral, animal, friend, Briton, soldier, general, or even field-marshal, who might this night attempt to stroll out of the proscribed area, would receive a royal salute.

The sergeant came in. "Fixed up them rockets, 'Arris? I think Jones is a bit jumpy to-night," he remarked of the sentry.

"'E's got a bit o' time to run yet, and I'm 'is relief. I want to put in a bit o' sleep first, so I 'ope's 'e won't go pooping orf at nix every five minutes. We 'ad enough of that larse night."

The speaker was Riley. Besides being selfish, he was, as has been said, conceited, and never let the detachment forget that he was the only marksman amongst them.

"Remember there's that place in the entanglement with no pebble tins on," said the sergeant. "Whybrow, you're for the job to-morrow morning. We've saved enough tins now. There's no fine wire left; but you can't have the string, mind. You must 'itch 'em up by the lids."

"All right, sergeant. What time's Mr Watson coming round?"

"He hasn't said. Some time Pip Emma¹ same as usual, I expect," was the reply as the sergeant again went out to consult with the sentry. Conversation turned on the subaltern commanding the

¹ "Pip Emma" is Signalese for P.M.

group of five blockhouses, whose stone lair was alongside "No. 336" farther down the line.

"Good sort, little Watson; carn't put putties on for toffee, though."

"Yes—'e's all wool, warranted unshrinkable. Not like the line of New Season's Goods—mostly 'ard cases and outfitter's Gordsends—which they're sweeping up at 'ome and sending out with these new regiments. Why, if I was at 'ome now on a bit of leaf, I dunno which I'd sooner do—start as a military outfitter or volunteer as an orficer."

"I don't mind *them* so much. They've giv' 'em the rank, fair chucked it at 'em, and small blame to 'em for taking it. What feeds me is some of those dollar-a-day troopers of the irreg'lars. Did I tell you wot 'appened to me at Aarpoort Junction?" The aggrieved voice was that of Whybrow.

"Wot?"

"Something chronic. It was my go of sentry on the orficers' mess at the refresh-

ment-rooms. No one but orficers allowed in was my orders. Well, four natty fellows — reg'lar sauceboats they was — in British warms, gaiters an' spurs, with a pigeon-toed cavalry walk, comes up and wants to go in. 'Carn't go in 'ere,' was the remark I passed. 'Why not?' says one. 'Orficers' mess,' I says. Then the first of 'em—a good-looking perisher he was too—swaggers up an' says, 'Look heaw, my man, what's your corpse? Don't you know an orficer when you see him, eh? Stand up to attention!'"

"Wot did you do?"

"Do! Wot 'ud you 'ave done. 'Beg pardon, sir,' I says, 'I didn't know you were orficers.' 'You should be more careful,' says 'e, and in they goes."

"Were they orficers?"

"*Orficers!* They was troopers from Somebody's Fighting Light 'Orse. Got as full as ticks, they did, as soon as they was inside, and insulted the Colonel."

"Strewth! Old Lobster?"

"Straight. And wasn't I on the mat all

right for allowin' of 'em in. Something crool."

"But 'ad they got stars on, Cockie?"

"*Ikona!* They 'ad British warms as I tell you. 'Ow could I see through their bluff? Talk of Bojers being slim. Why——"

"Did yer get yer own back, Eyebrows?"

"Not yet; I'll watch it. But I'm laying for all Fighting, Mounted or Blighted Scouts, 'Orse, Light 'Orse, or Carbineers now whenever I meet 'em. I've got it in for them all right. Don't you make no bloomer."

The sergeant re-entered. After reassuring himself as to the arrangement of the spare ammunition, he sat down with the rest in the dark. It was too early to sleep, but conversation had died away. The wind had risen slightly, and the wires were singing louder than before. Otherwise there was silence.

Suddenly the dog growled, there was a scuffling of feet on the gravel, and Jones's rifle rang out. The report was not unexpected; the men were not unused to hear-

ing rifles fired ; yet they all started. It only showed that their nerves had been on the stretch for some time, and were, in spite of their philosophy, not in the best order. Each at once snatched up his weapon and manned his loophole. By the time they had reached their places the sentry's rifle had spoken three times.

"We're for it," said one man, frankly nervous.

"There's Bill Jones wasting good ammunition ; firing at an aasvogel at nine 'undred on a dark night, I lay," jeered Riley. Also uneasy, he endeavoured to conceal the fact with a sneer.

His remark was punctuated by two more reports. Eight bullets had sped their way into the darkness, launched with the clamorous blessing of the frantic Smutty, when No. 27435 Private W. Jones, sentry on duty, scrambled round the shield or traverse protecting the doorway of the little fortress, and tumbled into the room slightly breathless.

"What is it ?" said the sergeant.

II.

“O Mother, come quick and bring a big stick,
Come over the wall to me.”

—*Popular Song.*

“MOUNTED man ; coming towards the line,” gasped Jones. “Waited for him to get closer. Stopped and turned ; so I let ’im ’ave most of me magazine at six ’undred. Think I got the blighter. Tumbled off his ’orse.”

As a matter of history the mounted man did not stop or turn till the sentry fired. But there are usually more than one account of most occurrences, and several of a fight.

“Which direction ?” The sergeant was a business-like man.

“Between us and the deserted farm, sergeant, on Lonely ’Ill.”

Now, there was not really the slightest confusion in the blockhouse—only a little excitement. And it was due to the fact that the men were all staring intently through the loopholes, to the jerky talk of Private Jones and to the yapping of the now thoroughly unstrung Smutty, that none of them heard the report of a rifle fired twice at a distance of some thousand yards. The third time it spoke its leaden messenger arrived with a vicious bang which drowned the noise of sentry and hound, and set the pebbles in the double wall dancing. To those who have spent happy days marking on a rifle-range, the jangling sound produced in the blockhouse would have suggested the ricochet which sweeps a handful of stones with it on to the ironwork of the butt. To those to whom Fate has so far denied this supreme pleasure it is not easy to describe. The noise certainly jarred, and was rather overpowering. The roof probably magnified the din to those under it. It was the first time so far that the walls of the Saveloy

Hotel had been thus insulted, and the fact produced a decided impression and some comment, of a disrespectful nature—

“No blooming error about that visitin’-card.”

“Come in, Clarence, and wipe your feet.”

“That does it!”

—were some of the remarks with which the cupro-nickel-coated messenger with the ogival nose was greeted.

From the loophole facing the west came excited shouts, “Saw the flash, sergeant.”

The force of that savage blow could only have been produced by powder, and even the superior shot could scoff no longer—especially as during a pause in the dog’s barking he heard a faint “pick-pock” in the distance.

“That’s a Morzer¹ right enough,” he said with an air of finality. Besides being a marksman, he posed as an authority on firearms generally.

¹ The usual mispronunciation of “Mauser.”

The sergeant prepared for action scientifically. He now knew that this was the enemy. He knew their direction and range. He also knew that the latter had probably been incorrectly estimated in the gloom. He gave his orders without discussion.

"That's enough of it! Bertwistle, Whybrow, Inkpen, Baker, — shoot at the flash at six, seven, eight, and nine 'undred. If you can't see anything, don't fire."

Bertwistle, Whybrow, and Co. evidently did see something, for their rifles at once replied for them. As for the crack shot, it so happened that he had been told off to a loophole which commanded the barbed-wire fence along the railway line to the south—an important direction. But between his loophole and the supposed direction of the enemy was the entrance to the little fort. It was now quite dark, and straight to his front he could see nothing. He found, however, that by squeezing his left arm and shoulder close

into the wall and making the most of the lateral splay of the opening, he could slew his rifle very nearly in the direction of the "Morzer" fire. It entailed jamming his weapon across the loophole. It also meant that the sharp edge of the iron sheet cut into his hand. That he did not mind so long as he was "in it," and his skill was not wasted. He carefully adjusted his sight by feel to seven hundred yards, then paused, glaring into the blackness on his right. He could see nothing. Still, the sergeant did not know that; and it was quite useless to try to say anything to him in the din which was being raised. He continued staring till his eyes watered. Ah! Was it imagination? or could he discern a faint spark or flash? Yes—he saw some faint points of light,—and they were dancing about. Without jerk or pull he gently squeezed the trigger. A second hostile bullet simultaneously found its billet and made the little shanty ring. Riley saw the flash distinctly. It was

quite close. "Fairly crawling with 'em!" he ejaculated, and emptied his magazine. By a series of coincidences a succession of bullets struck the blockhouse while he was actually firing, and all on the side of the house on which he was. With a thrill of excitement and pride he absently smoothed his quiff, now damp with perspiration. Very likely one of the Kaffirs or some spy had given away the fact that a marksman was in the blockhouse, and that his station faced the line to the south. If so, the enemy had thought it worth while to detach a picked sharpshooter or two to snipe him and keep down his fire. With a glow of not unjustified satisfaction Private Albert Riley braced his shoulders, sucked his teeth, and recharged his magazine. He'd give the sharpshooters a bit of all right! He'd learn them!

What with their own shooting and the hammering that their home was receiving, the garrison now really warmed to its work. The uproar grew intense, and the

air became full of dust—not less choking because invisible. As each crash shook the wall some of the more excitable men apostrophised the foe in husky language of an unquotable nature. The curious habit of hurling abuse at an enemy several hundred yards distant cannot be explained on rational grounds; it is a matter of sentiment and nerves. At least comprehensible when a comrade is shattered by the enemy's projectiles, it is not so—except for its comforting effect on the user—when no one has been injured. And yet how common it is! Ammunition was being expended rapidly, and the sergeant soon felt that the time had come to exercise that fire-control which is the duty of the commander in action. He whistled.

The blockhouse ceased to vomit bullets. Above the whines of Smutty, whose voice had now given out, and above the rustling of the men's feet among the empties on the floor, the reports of the enemy's fire were heard distinctly. The non-commis-

sioned officer took post for a moment at a loophole in order to scan for himself the quarter from which danger threatened. All along the ridge above the farm the musketry was sparkling. There was no doubt about the thing; it was no false alarm.

"All wool this time," he said. "The place is stiff with them. We must 'usband our ammunition. Remember we've only got about seven 'undred rounds per man! They're concentrating fire on the door side to judge by their hits. P'raps they mean to rush the line that side. I expect the little lot on the hill is only amusing us while their wire-chopping party is feeling for a soft spot in the fence. Seen any of 'em along the line your way, Riley?"

"No, only to me right, sergeant."

"Well, they mean biz to-night. It's time we rang up headquarters. Keep a look-out all, and give 'em a shot or two if you see 'em close in."

He did his noisiest at the telephone

without any success. The matter was too urgent for him to stand on his dignity, and he was forced to appeal to the local amateur expert. Even then he was not quite ingenious.

"Can't waste any more time over the darned thing. Here, Baker, you have a try."

The expert at once diagnosed from the dead absence of vibration in the diaphragm of the receiver that communication was interrupted.

"Wire's cut."

"Oh, they 'ave, 'ave they?" said the non-com., in a curiously annoyed tone. "P'raps Mister Blooming Hoof Commandant's Intelligence orficer didn't know as we have rockets! 'Arris, just touch orf a couple. We'll pass the word to Mother and chawnce it. Mind yourself when the things fizz. The portfire and matches lay in my haversack."

With a flash and a hiss a snake of fire rushed up into the sky and burst into a

golden shower. Comment on its beauty was cut short by the hiss of the second firework, and by the yell and execrations of Private Harris, from whose hand it had kicked off. Jumping from the packing-case, he slipped on the empties and sprawled full length on the floor, dropping the burning portfire on the luckless Smuttie as he fell. The interior of the blockhouse was at once lit by a pale light which pierced the stifling fog flavoured with the fumes of sulphur and singeing fur now filling the place. The dog, whose coat was ablaze, did two complete circuits of the small room at seventy miles an hour, upset a couple of men in his flight, then found the doorway. He streaked across the railway like a fiery beacon to a pool he wotted of in an adjacent sluit, where he obtained relief in a foot of water between a couple of dead oxen. Amid much coughing Private Harris, whose hand was badly burned, was adjured to pick up—chuck out, put out the portfire. Any

of these actions was easier said than done. To drop the thing out of a loophole would have given away the blockhouse, while to put it out was impossible, for the earth floor was too hard to stamp it in or bury it quickly, and portfires are not extinguished easily. Luckily the commander was eventually inspired with the brilliant idea of cutting off the lighted end with a shovel; but the half-inch still burning almost succeeded in asphyxiating the garrison.

"Here, Riley, you touch off a brace more, and watch your 'and," he said.

"Next lot's just signalled for Mother too," replied that soldier, after carrying out orders. "Been firing for a long time."

The men at the western loopholes had now been shooting slowly and carefully for some minutes, but there had been no hit on the blockhouse. The sight of the activity of the neighbouring fort egged Riley to chip in again with some accurate shots. Bullets again at once struck the wall near

his loophole, and some splinters of flint hit him in the cheek. It was as he thought: they did not like his shooting, and a sniper was firing at his flash at close range. Far more spurred on than daunted, he now did something fancy in the way of snap-shooting, and drew a perfect hail of shots in reply.

"Trying to rush the railway?" roared the commander.

The marksman did not answer; but he knew better: they were not doing that yet. Though the pace of his shooting now almost became of the trick or show order, the Boer watching him was evidently no slouch at the game, and returned shot for shot. The thing was now working in a vicious circle. Every spurt on Riley's part was answered by fresh efforts on the part of the enemy, which again resulted in increased activity from all those firing from the blockhouse. The spirit was catching, and the remainder of the men who had so far hardly used their rifles were moved

to join in, regardless of the direction in which their loopholes faced. Occasional qualms at the expenditure of ammunition induced the sergeant to blow his whistle, when comparative peace reigned, but never for long.

The moon, now peeping out from behind masses of slowly drifting clouds, looked down upon a horrible scene of human strife. To the west the long irregular line of flame crackling intermittently on the veld showed where so-called Christian men of one side were trying to kill their brothers of another race. Along the railway were two small centres of activity, whose radiating spurts of fire betrayed the presence of other human beings, who also called themselves Christians, imbued with the same homicidal motive. Presently, along the shining metals from the south, round the curve, slid a long dark mass. Approaching laboriously behind a volcano belching sparks and smoke, with a steady white glare shining ahead of it, it was

also outlined on one side with spurts of flame. Occasionally larger flashes accompanied by heavy reports were visible. Finally this shape came to rest between the blockhouses and continued steadily to spit fire. Its arrival upon the scene was first observed by the watchful Riley.

"'Ere she comes. Good old Ma!" he tried to shout as he took his hands from his heated weapon. "Now, let 'em break acrost the line." But his parched throat only gave out a hoarse whisper. His shoulder was sore, his hands were cut by the edge of the iron and blistered by his overheated rifle barrel, his eyes were full of grit and smarted, and he was piqued that he had not yet silenced his own immediate opponents, but he was pleased.

During a temporary abatement of noise the welcome booming of the 12-pounders, the bark of the Hotchkiss and the sullen "poop-oop-oop" of a Martini Maxim were heard distinctly.

“Let ’em all come,” said the vainglorious marksman.

It was now not so much a question of merely beating off the foe or of stopping them crossing the line. It was a matter of killing or capturing the lot; and our “good men and true” relaxed no efforts because of the reinforcement. This diminutive outwork of Empire continued through the long hours of darkness to do its best and worry the enemy, until the atmosphere reeked of burning cordite, and the depth of cartridge-cases on the floor made walking almost impossible. So through the night waxed and waned the battle. But the foe were evidently driven by some powerful motive, for they continued the fight every whit as obstinately as the British.

III.

Tout vient à point à qui sait attendre—but not always !

MEANWHILE, all was quiet in Jakhal's Vlei. No hint of the approach of the foe had reached the hub of civilisation from either of its Intelligence "antennæ"—the posts up the river and the blockhouses along the railway line—and it had settled down hopefully for a night in bed. Its Piccadilly Circus, the market-place near the station, was absolutely dead; no lights shone in the only thoroughfare of the little tin town; there was no traffic; and, save for the gentle simmering of one or two locomotives in the station-yard, there was no sound. When at intervals the moon peeped out from behind the sailing clouds its rays were reflected from the

low - pitched roofs of the iron shanties, so that the place presented the weird appearance of a township built of frosted silver, dead, cold, and peaceful as the extinct volcanoes in a lunar landscape. It appeared to be, nay, was literally, bathed in light and wrapped in slumber. There were some signs of life, however, in the sentinels of the various defence posts of the fortress, of which the railway station formed the kernel; but these posts were a long way out, and the sentries standing chest-deep in their trenches were not visible except from quite close. During the fleeting periods of light the mass of a hill could be seen looming up to the east of the houses. This stronghold was naturally known as Gun Hill — few, indeed, were the fortified areas not possessed of a Gun Hill or a One Tree Hill. Rising to a height of some sixty feet above the town, this excrescence owed its importance more to the heavy artillery ensconced upon it than to its elevation.

Such wind as there was now blew from the north, and the faint and fitful splutter of distant musketry proceeding from the railway to the south could not at all compete in interest with the chilblains of the cold-footed sentries who happened to hear it. As has been stated, the blockhouse lines turned and muttered in their sleep too often for their restlessness to cause much excitement. Even when the signals for "Mother" shot up and pierced the darkness like gigantic and quick-growing fairy beanstalks of golden light there was no great pother. Here and there a doubtful watcher did confer with a shivering and peevish superior, but nothing more happened. It was a matter for the mobile force. The *rôle* of the defenders of Jakhal's Vlei in these operations was to hold up the enemy being driven towards them, to prevent the capture and sack of the rich city, to save its burgesses from slaughter and rapine. In a word, the garrison's job was to sit tight. So far there was no sign

of the enemy. Wherever he was, he was beyond the radius of action of the fortress, and there was no need as yet to disturb the rest of the Commandant or of any of the officers—especially the Commandant.

But eventually the boom of "Mother's" artillery quivering in the air put an edge on the situation and created some interest. After all, guns were guns, and did not go off for nothing, as rifles had a habit of doing. Their employment in this case suggested that an armoured train had come up, investigated, and deemed the affair sufficiently serious to take a hand itself. There was now more consultation, firstly of sentries with non-coms., then of non-coms. with subalterns, then with the officers commanding posts. And so up the military hierarchy climbed the horrid alarum of war, until the Colonel Commanding was aroused by the discreet cough of his staff—Lieutenant Tyrrwhitt-Tyrrwhole.

At first inclined to be fractious at being

disturbed for mere firing along the block-house lines, the Commandant perked up considerably and took notice when he himself heard the guns. Though not old in years, he was too old a bird in this war to be over-sanguine or to have many illusions. As an officer of the Mounted Branch, he had spent many months trekking, and had then been severely wounded. On his way to return to duty he had been seized at some junction by the long arm of telegraphy, appointed to the command of a defensive post, and literally jerked by the railway into Jakhal's Vlei. At the time when he was awakened by the deprecatory cough at his bedside he had only been "Commandant J. V." for some seven hours. In reality he was a pleasant man, full of old-world courtesy, and, in normal times, possessed of charming manners. But garrison duty was not his *métier*, and he did not like it. The fact that he had already had time to make this clear but not time to get to know his

officers, probably accounted for the excessive suavity with which he had been aroused.

Hastily throwing on a "British Warm" and jamming his feet into a pair of *veld schoen*, he now hurried with his staff over to the telephone office. As he shuffled along he presented, even in the feeble light of the lantern carried by Tyrrwhole, a somewhat curious figure. He still wore the nightcap or tea-cosy helmet in which, owing to the lack of glass in the windows of his quarters, he had been forced to sleep. This was the product of fair fingers at home, and was knitted of the material stocked in fancy repositories under the name of "Berlin Wool Fingering, shade Ruby O O." Though the Colonel was a small man, his "British Warm" of the old original "Seymour" pattern issued to soldiers was indecently short even for him; but on the credit side, the sleeves of his ready-made sleeping suit hung well over his hands, and the trousers were close reefed, while

the loudness of its pattern would have charmed the heart of a Fingo belle. Lastly, his *veld schoen* were untanned, with the hair outside. Tyrrwhole's kit, though by no means neat, possessed considerably less "zip" than that of his chief, and calls for no remark.

The telephone operator was fast asleep on the floor of his office, with one ear near the instrument. Also new to the station, he was the class of man who becomes rather spoiled by the possession of technical knowledge, which he likes to show by an unnecessary display of trade jargon. In disposition he was not unlike Private Albert Riley, marksman, now fighting for life not so many miles away, and as a result numerous comrades in arms had often expressed a cruel but sincere desire to tread on his neck. At the present moment he was dead tired, and showed no pleasure at being aroused, nor any respect for his visitors, whose rank he did

not know. He yawned loudly and vulgarly, stretched, and then snarled—

“Now then—what is it?”

“Get on to Blockhouse 342 $\frac{1}{2}$,” said Tyrrwhole, surprised at the man’s manner, but himself too tired to take notice. He turned to the Commandant and added, “That’s where they judged the rockets to be sent up from, sir.”

Though in the dim light the operator had not been favourably impressed either by the tea-cosy or the hairy foot-gear, he was still less so when he turned up his lantern. But the tone of authority in which Tyrrwhole’s order had been given made obedience advisable. He fumbled casually with a plug on a switch-board, rang up, and listened. There was no reply. He repeated the operation viciously. Again there was no reply. He dropped the receiver with a suffering expression on his dirty face and snapped out the one word “Dis!”

"Eh?" asked the Colonel.

"Dis!"

The Commandant J. V. was now roused; the greater part of the old-world courtesy slid from him like a mantle.

"Damn it, man, talk English. What the devil d'you mean by '*Dis*'?"

Before the surprised soldier, who did not imagine that any one could misunderstand his office jargon, was able to reply, the staff interposed. Much younger than his senior, he was more in touch with low life and its expressions.

"He means 'disconnected,' sir. Wire's probably cut by the enemy—or our own fire."

"Well, why can't he say so? Tell him to ring up the next blockhouse beyond. We'll see what they know about it."

The operator blinked stupidly, as if paralysed; he made no motion. Even the staff looked deprecatingly surprised. The remainder of the colonel's courtesy now went by the board.

“Con—found it, man—what the dooce are you staring at? Don’t you hear? Ring up the next.”

Again did the staff intervene. “Can’t do it, sir; there’s only one wire along the railway, and any break between $342\frac{1}{2}$ and this cuts out everything beyond.”

“Ah!” replied the Commandant wisely. He, quite naturally, knew nothing about the number of wires leading to the telephonic ganglion. Momentarily staggered, but not defeated, he added the time-honoured remark which comes so handy to one in doubt.

“Must have that seen to at once. Make a note of it, Tyrrwhole.”

“Very good, sir,” replied that glib gentleman as he started scribbling in his note-book. But what the Commandant meant exactly he knew no more than the Commandant did himself.

“We’ll try the river line, sir,” suggested Tyrrwhole. He turned to the operator, “Ring up Dead Horse Drift.”

Communication was successfully obtained with this and other posts on the western side. The only information of value gained was that heavy firing could be heard on the higher ground away from the river to the east, and that a few shells had burst not far off one post. However, while Tyrr-whole was thus acting as military remembrancer to his chief, as is the duty of the perfect staff officer, he heard the footsteps of some one running up to the office. He swung out of the doorway to investigate, and was at once greeted by the breathless runner—

"Hullo, Squirrel! That you? Good egg! Been looking for you all over the shop. Got the range of the blighters top hole—just over four thousand five hundred. Think the C.O.'s man enough to let me touch off a round or two from Tweedledum and Tweedledee?"

The speaker could not see the warning grimaces which the staff, who had his back to the light, was making at him, and he

blundered on and almost into the curious figure emerging from the doorway. Each stared at the other, surprised and puzzled. But the resiliency of youth, aided on this occasion by the vicious and uncalled-for cow-kick dealt him by Tyrrwhole, as the latter suddenly turned his back and faced the doorway, enabled the newcomer to recover first.

“Oh—good morn—good evening, sir.”

Seeing no responsive enthusiasm whatever gleam in the eyes scanning him, his tone became less effusive. “I was just—reporting to your staff officer that we had the range and could drop a shell or two on to them. I thought I’d—I ought to let you know, sir.”

If the Commandant’s appearance was bizarre, that of the cheery newcomer did not show any excess of punctilious care. He was in reality the Gunner subaltern in charge of the two howitzers on Gun Hill, though his connection with any particular corps was hardly more obvious than

his rank. In fact, the only outward sign of it was the small turnip-shaped piece of cardboard which, hanging by a thread, dangled upside down from his field-service cap like the drop-emerald from a rajah's turban. This, to one who knew, was the remains of the rich "wire lace" gold grenade—the proud badge of the Royal Regiment—for which the wearer had paid a large price to his tailor, or of which, if manner can be taken for a gauge of character, the price had more probably been debited to his small account. In a "British Warm" and patched breeches, half-laced boots and no gaiters, with one flap of his cap well turned down over his ear, he might, but for the cardboard sign and his youthful face, have been taken for anything from a conductor of a gang of Kaffirs to a general.

"Umph!" was the Commandant's reply.

It was not exactly a cordial reception of the personal report of his O.C.R.A., and it did not lead anywhere; and once again

was the oil of peace pumped through the hose of tact on to troublous waters. The staff interposed.

"This is the officer commanding the section of five-inch howitzers on Gun Hill, sir."

"Ah! Well, Mr—er——"

"Greig-Usher, sir."

"Mr—Gusher—don't you think you had better go back to your post and wait there till I arrive? Mind you don't fire a round without a direct order from me."

In the face of this there was nothing for it but to retire gracefully; and the usually irrepressible subaltern, not quite oblivious of the grin of the staff, who now again had his back to the light, added speed to the grace with which he vanished.

"Probably a zealous officer, but impetuous in temperament and somewhat flippant in tone," was the Commandant's remark.

"Yes, sir, very keen young feller," replied Achates.

Psychologically the staff officer and the youth he characterised as "young feller" were poles apart. The former had served long enough to think of his future, and suffered seniors gladly. The latter youth lived entirely for the moment, and was suffered by seniors—but not gladly.

In another moment the neck of the telephonist, who by now was again fast asleep, might have received, morally, the trampling which it deserved had not a drop in the wind enabled the two officers to distinguish the sullen note of the Martini Maxims of the armoured train. The sound was particularly loud.

"Things seem to be moving, Tyrrwhole, in this direction too. I'll get a few clothes on before matters come to a head. You turn out the garrison, pick up my orderly and the bugler, and meet me at my quarters in five minutes."

The Colonel disappeared in the darkness, and the staff's lantern wobbled its way across towards the main guard, now quar-

tered in the ruins of the "Kaffir truck" store of Mr Issy Blumbaümer. That worthy parasite was no longer adhering to Jakhal's Vlei; but if alive was certain to be doing "bithneth" somewhere in the land of Ham—probably peddling unripe peaches or tinned rabbit curry to a half-starved soldiery. Though the general use of bugles had by now been dropped, they were still sounded in certain garrisons where concealment was out of the question, and in two minutes there floated over Jakhal's Vlei the notes of that most mournful and sweetest of all calls—"The Assembly." It was caught up and repeated in one or two of the outlying posts, and here and there a light flitted about. But even now there was no bustle and very little commotion, since the whole garrison, except the small reserve, were already at their posts, under arms.

When the Commandant and his staff—now increased by one orderly and one bugler—reached Gun Hill, the former was

in uniform ; but he had forgotten to change the "fingering" helmet. The fact did not create any alarm or despondency ; the full value of tint could not be appreciated in the moonlight. The distant battle was still proceeding merrily with varying bouts of activity, and the flashes of the guns could be seen from the summit of the hill. Most of those of the rifles were hidden by the undulations of the ground. The situation had not yet been cleared up, and was as difficult as it was tantalising, for the fighting remained stationary, and until the enemy were driven right up to the defences the garrison was powerless. In vain did the eager men watch for the proverbial herd of maddened cattle which, driven ahead of the flying commando, should endeavour to break through the network of iron. Not an ox, not a horse, not a desperate sheep tried even to smell the barbed wire, let alone charge it ; and with the mystery deepened the general disgust. The Intelligence and Supply

Officer and Provost-Marshal now cautiously approached the Commandant and made tentative proposals to go out reconnoitring himself or to take out a party of scouts in order to find out exactly what was going on. But he met with no success. The Chief was adamant in his refusal of permission for any such attempt. And rightly so. Scouts could do no more than discover that a fight was going on—which was already known; they could not tell who was fighting or where. To do this would necessitate close contact, which might mean capture or death at the hands of the enemy, or death at the hands of their own side. Besides, so long as it was dark, even such precise intelligence would not help the troops in Jakhal's Vlei two miles away. If there were no reasonable possibility of gaining some definite advantage in exchange, the Colonel was not going to allow more lives to be risked. And so it came about that while some hundreds of Christian men were spending

the bitter night in the actual attempt to kill each other, scores of others were cursing their slowness and awaiting with ghoulisn expectancy the approach of their own chance.

As may have been imagined, this fever of impatience to a special degree possessed the soul of the O.C.R.A. He was not one of your strong, silent men. In him, indeed, the longing for "*Kanonen Futter*" had by now become intensified till it was an obsession betraying the impetuous bloodthirstiness of the novice, and not the cold, calculating touch of the artist in slaughter. Though he realised that the guns firing in the distance were probably those on an armoured train, he gathered that the enemy must be at about the same range, only more to the west, and had long ago prepared for instant action. But until the Commandant gave the word he could do nothing. There were the hostile forces gambolling and taking liberties within easy reach of his monsters.

And here was this stray freak colonel who had suddenly blown into Jakhal's Vlei from God-knows-where, preventing his seizing the chance of a lifetime. The man was not even a Gunner. He very likely knew all about hand-guns, but how could he realise the value of the intervention of the Third Arm. From his turn-out he was probably a prehistoric "dug-out," a "was-bird" of weird early Victorian ideas. Besides, he had been distinctly snuffy when approached, and had misnamed his O.C.R.A. foully. What was the Service coming to?

And if this beardless youth was dying to fire off a shell in earnest, can he be censured? It was, at bottom, no lust for slaughter. He was simply keen. In the life of a soldier the chance of the "real thing" comes—perhaps once—perhaps never; the remainder of his days are spent in make-belief, in training and practice for the event—*der Tag*—which may never arrive. In other walks of life a man

exercises his trade all the time. He does not spend his career in—so to speak—firing off blank ammunition or in shooting at a target. Who can blame a desire for the "real thing," or professional zeal, whether it be that of a burglar, a Harley Street appendix-hunter, or a trainer of blind monkeys?

Itching to approach the Commandant again, Lieutenant Greig-Usher for a long time fidgeted backwards and forwards between two pits on the hill-top. In each of these a few silent men were clotted round a pair of clumsy wheels with broad shining tyres, from between which projected skywards a squat howitzer. At last he could stand the suspense no longer. Besides being a zealous officer of some initiative, he was determined. In the words of a song oozing with music-hall patriotism which was current at the period, he was one of the "Boys of the Bull-dog Breed," and an indiarubber bull-dog at that. But he often lost from want of tact

what he might have gained by pertinacity. Screwing up his courage, he gradually approached the figure in the red bonnet, and carefully adjusting strength to distance, or rather, charge to range, managed accidentally to stumble over a stone a little way in front of his chief. He clutched his foot as if in pain and said "Confound it!" loudly. Then, making play to recognise for the first time the man in front of whom he had used such a very strong expression, he added: "Oh, I beg your pardon, sir. I didn't see you were so close." So far so good, but his next words were a relapse—

"Bit tricky walking round among these beastly stones in the moonlight, eh, what? By the way, sir, I was wrong about the range in their guns. It is really four thousand *three* hundred, and not four thou——"

"Thanks, Mr Gusher, thanks——" Was there a malicious twinkle in the eye of the "Was-bird" as he repeated the name, or

was it a glint of moonlight?—"but, you don't seem to realise that they're almost certain to be our own guns on an armoured train. As to the riflemen, it would be criminal to shoot at them without knowing who they are, and even if we knew they were the enemy, it would be worse than useless. No, we must have more light thrown upon the situation before we——"

"Quite, sir, quite. Of course that's what I was thinking," was the totally untruthful reply. "Four thousand is about the best range for star-shell, and I have a lot here."

"If that's what you're driving at, you can burst a couple of star-shell to the right of their guns, though I doubt whether it will be the slightest use at this distance."

The subaltern waited no second bidding. With a thrill such as he had not experienced since as a cadet he had roared out the executive word for firing a friction-tube at the half-yearly inspection at "The Shop,"

he now gave the necessary command. There followed a subdued clamour and the clanking as of iron oven-doors being opened and shut. Then silence.

“Number one—fire!”

With a roar and a shriek the shell rumbled up into the sky, while every glass on the hill-top was directed towards the veld to the right of the distant guns. The landscape was lit up in a ghostly sheen, and the rails on the visible stretches of line glittered as the projectile burst into a cloud of stars which floated downwards; but even through the best glasses nothing could be distinguished of the enemy.

The second howitzer spoke, and its missile burst with equal brilliancy and with equally negative result. When its last star had faded into nothingness, the moonlight seemed to have grown more watery than before, the darkness to have increased.

The din of battle in the distance continued, varying in intensity but never

quite ceasing. There was nothing for Jakhal's Vlei but to wait for the dawn, or the enemy — whichever should come first. And right profanely did Jakhal's Vlei wait.

IV.

“In the morning,
In the morning by the bright light.”

To return to the scene of carnage at the front, it was not until the sad glimmer in the sky heralded the approach of another day that a halt was called to the slaughter being carried on between the railway and Lonely Farm. By this time the firing had died away completely; but an uncomfortable feeling had seized the participants on our side that things had somehow not developed properly, for no enemy had been actually seen. The armoured train, which had been the focus of so much brilliancy during the long hours of darkness, now sidled towards No. 342½, and behind it slunk a consort which had puffed

up to the sound of the guns during the night and right nobly taken its share in hurling missiles over the veld. It is not easy to say which of these two collections of metal boxes had the more draggled appearance. Clothed entirely in steel, each train was painted from funnel-rim to coupling-bars in a non-committal neutral tint almost brutal in its suggestion of sheer business. As the light grew stronger the grey sides of the trucks could be seen to be mottled with the dark stains of oil and streaked with rust like the plates of a cattle-boat after a North Atlantic voyage. The 12-pounder guns peering from behind their shields and the Union-Jacks hanging from the gaffs at the sterns of the trains gave them almost the appearance of slovenly-kept ships of war. The whole outlook was dismal. Besides the two sinister trains there was nothing in the drab landscape but steel rails, barbed-wire fencing and entanglements, and an

iron blockhouse. Truly has pomp and panoply departed from warfare.

Both trains drew up alongside the blockhouse, and from one of Mother's trucks, almost squinting from lack of sleep and the headache produced by the metallic din which had assailed his ears all night, descended a dirty-looking tramp clad in soiled khaki. When he hailed the commander of No. 342 $\frac{1}{2}$, however, his voice proclaimed that he was the officer commanding the train. Whilst the worthy sergeant was ponderously climbing through the entanglement in obedience to this summons, a second ruffian swung himself down from the hinder train and joined the first.

It was the fashion at this time for the officers on board the armoured trains to imitate their comrades of the Sister Service. Not only was the senior of them known as the "Commodore of the Fleet," but the sincere form of flattery descended down to tricks of deportment and of personal

appearance. The military men called the scarves they wore round their necks "sweat rags," which they imagined to be a seaman-like habit; and since it was usually impossible, also contrary to regulation, for them to be clean shaved, they satisfied themselves with trimming whatever hair they could grow on their faces to a "torpedo beard" point. On the line now, also, curious expressions such as "Ay, ay!" and "Make it so," were sometimes heard. This inversion or perversion, however, was not all on the side of the army, for the naval officers holding shore billets at the coast ports for lengthy periods gradually became military in their method of life. They took to wearing khaki, helmets and putties, and in many other ways aped the "leather-neck."

As soon as the sergeant arrived alongside he was knee-deep in questions as to the strength of the enemy, and whether any of them had crossed the line, &c. But Mother's commander was in a hurry,

and after a few moments' talk he swung himself up into his conning tower.

"By the way, any casualties, sergeant?"

"Non', sir, only one man slightly burnt."

"Well," continued the officer, turning to his brother skipper, "as the wire's cut I'll just steam up to Jakhal's to report, and I'll scout the line as I go. Meanwhile you'd better lie up here for a bit and keep your weather eye lifting. I can't make head or tail of it; but the veld is so tricky that a whole crowd of the Brethren may be lying doggo in some hollow waiting to make a rush when we're off our guard."

"Right-o," said the other.

Mother very soon puffed out of sight. The sergeant and the skipper left behind remained in earnest conversation, an object of interest to the many pairs of poached eyes peeping through slits in chilled steel or corrugated iron. The officer had just thoughtfully given instructions for a pail of boiling water, drawn fresh and oily from

the boiler of the locomotive, to be taken up to the blockhouse, where no hot water would be ready for some time, when he happened to look steadily at the Saveloy Hotel. He rubbed his eyes and gave vent to an expressive whistle.

"By Jove, sergeant, your entrance traverse has been knocked about a bit. It's got a hole in it big enough for a fox's earth! Looks as if they'd got artillery on to you. I didn't hear any guns." Considering the noise that his own scrap-iron caravan had been making, this was not even negative evidence.

The sergeant gazed with curiosity at the iron shield. There was the hole quite visible and as large as life. To tell the truth, he had not noticed it himself when he had rushed out in the semi-darkness, but he was not going to give that away, and the assumed indifference in his voice when he spoke was a direct measure of the pride with which this proof of a

desperate fight inspired him. "Oh, that? Yes, we got our share of knocking about, sir. I dessay they did turn a few guns and pom-poms on to us—we must a' been worrying them a bit. Not that it made any difference to us, sir; we were too busy getting a bit of our own back. But it was 'ottish at times!"

His listener was just thinking that this was just the right sort of man to be on an independent job, when the sentry of the armoured train announced that a small party of mounted men was approaching from the direction from which the enemy had been firing during the night. It needed but a glance to discover that the party was British. At this moment the whistle of Mother returning from Jakhal's Vlei was heard. The sergeant now thought that with all this force present he might let his men leave their lair, and, having obtained permission, shouted out to his detachment that they could come out of

the house. He himself stayed by the train in the centre of things. He wanted to hear the news.

Outside No. 342½ a small crowd of peevish soldiery gradually collected, and began stamping and beating their arms across their chests, for it was still very cold. The hot water from the engine, now slightly more coloured and called coffee, was served out and helped to restore their circulation. Some of the men wandered round the house examining the various bullet-holes in the outer skin, and when one found a hole opposite where he had been standing, he seemed to be more amused than grateful to the good shingle. Most of the detachment, however, Private Riley excepted, gathered round the entrance shield. This shield, composed of the same materials as the walls of the blockhouse, was placed immediately in front of the doorway in such a position that men could enter by going round it on either side, but no bullets could be fired directly into the

interior of the room. Its present state, indeed, had excited some surprise as soon as the light had grown strong enough for it to be seen. From about the level of the adjacent loopholes upwards the corrugated iron was perforated with scores of small holes which were so close together in the centre that they coalesced into one large gash. Through this the shingle from above had poured out into a little heap on the ground.

Nearly all the men had passed some remark on this rent when coming out of the house, but some of the more critical were not satisfied with such a casual inspection. They must needs examine the perforations and feel their edges. Naturally, therefore, it was not long before they found out to their surprise that whatever missiles had made the holes had punched them from the blockhouse and not from outside. At this discovery there was much sniggering of the nature which is very like an unspoken innuendo, and many

were the repetitions of that expressive word "Wot-o," with the emphasis on the last syllable. At last Private Jones—the sentry who had given the alarm on the previous evening—stopped and smelt the corrugated iron. He then coughed and spat expressively.

"Violets?" asked a sympathetic onlooker.

"Cordite, Cully, cordite, strong as the fouling I 'aven't yet cleaned out of me *bundook*.¹ Cordite—fruity cordite—all a blowin', all a growin'!" he continued in a falsetto costermonger's cry.

There was a general laugh from all except Riley, who still stood aloof from the glad throng. The detachment had somehow cheered up considerably since the damage to the shield had excited its interest. Soldiers are light-hearted fellows and easily roused to mirth. After more unnecessary coughing Jones again spoke in a casual tone.

¹ Soldier's Hindustani for rifle.

“ ‘Ow many packets of ammernition did you say you’d fired early this morning, Pull-through, that time the sergeant giv’ us the larse ‘cease fire’ but one—just before it began to get light?”

The moody marksman did not reply.

“ I know,” said Inkpen ; “ I made a note of it. It was forty-three packets then ; and he must have fired a tidy few rounds after that.”

“ Yes—forty-three it was—and the rest. ‘Owever, fair’s fair, and we’ll call it forty-three packets at ten rounds per. Lemme see—ten times three is thirty ; ten times forty is four ‘underd. Four ‘underd and thirty I make it. That right, all?”

“ That’s right.”

“ Four ‘underd and thirty rounds of good, Mark Five, Lee-Enfield ammernition is what you loosed off larse night, Number two two ought six ought one, Private Orlbert Riley, Marksman. Have you got anything to say, me man?” The last words were a very fair imitation of a well-

known phrase of the colonel commanding the battalion—the aforesaid Lobster.

Before the culprit had time to reply there was a diversion, but not a welcome one. A shout came from Riley's loophole, and a rifle was protruded and slewed round till it was pointed at the rent in the screen, its foresight not three feet from it. The shouter continued—

"Why, Pull-through, you're a butcher, an 'oly Terror. From this loophole I can see the bleedin' bodies of all them pore snipers you done in. Scores of 'em! And that close, too, I can almost touch 'em with me muzzle."

"Any aasvogels?" inquired Jones, who had been told of Riley's taunt of the previous evening.

Again was Riley the only man who neither spoke nor made sound of merriment. He had evidently done his talking during the night.

"Good old Orlbert! So they told orf a special squad of snipers to pick orf our

marksman, and he done in the lot? Oh dear!"

"Very satisfactory, me man! Must have got an inner every time. Not so bad at that distance. What did you make the range—two foot? And how much did you allow for wind? That sort of shooting don't give them a chance. It's nothing but dirty murder!"

"It's just as well," said the thoughtful Baker, "that we can't all of us be marksmen. There wouldn't be many block'ouses left in Africa. Real good shooting is a bit of a lukshury."

The men, now exceedingly cheerful, were so interested in baiting their wretched comrade that, excepting the sentry, they had not noticed that a party of mounted men had joined the stationary train, that Mother had returned, and that a heated conference had been going on for some minutes between half a dozen officers near the railway. And they were quite unaware that the sergeant—thunder on his brow—was even

then savagely striding towards them. His first words dispelled gaiety; there was no trace of the satisfied victor in them.

"Now then, you men, get a move on. Jones, you're 'for it.'"

"What for am I for it?"

"Givin' a false alarm. The Commandant Jakhal's coming up to go into this business in a minute."

For the first time this morning Riley chuckled. To take pleasure in another's discomfiture is not a nice trait, but it was one of his. Perhaps there was in this case some slight justification.

"False alarm?" said the injured Jones; "'oo's been firing at us all night then?"

"Never you mind," was the sergeant's disgusted answer,—he had already taken *his* medicine for having sent up the rockets, down below. He then proceeded with sublime inconsequence to blurt out the information which he could no longer bottle up.

"Who's been shootin' at us? Why, one

of them blarsted new mounted crowds that don't know enough to come in out of the rain. Got in front of the driving line. Blows in upon us just about dark, and never sends ahead to warn us nor anyone else. They've just discovered that the Boers hid theirselves, and broke back and got out of it the night before last. There isn't one within fifty miles."

"Was any of them hurt? Ain't Riley killed anybody?" said Jones. It was not entirely malice on his part, nor was it entirely a kind hope that no one had been killed. When one has been shooting all night, almost the first mental query is whether anything has been hit.

"Not a man, worse luck," growled the non-com. He did not mean it. He was only very sore. "There, that's enough of it. You gave the alarm, Jones, and you're——"

He ceased talking as if his voice was controlled by an automatic cut-out, and stalked up to the door-shield, the damage

of which he now saw at close quarters for the first time. He stared at it, then at the loophole—the marksman's loophole. He examined the shield from outside, from inside, felt the holes, and finally, as Jones had done, smelt them. And he had been talking big to that officer of the armoured train about guns, pom-poms, and a hot time! He gasped, then glared speechless at Riley.

The sound of approaching voices showed that the officers were coming up towards the house. The sergeant had to make up his mind what to do. Even had he wished to screen the culprit, which he did not, or the crime, which he did, he could not conceal the gaping chasm in the corrugated iron. It were best at any sacrifice to himself—or another—to uphold discipline. Again he glared at Riley, on the point of making him a prisoner, but uncertain as to the exact nature of the crime he had committed. With inspecting officers so close, to confine a man without any definite charge ready would be fatal.

Good soldier as he was, the sergeant was not too well versed in what was required by the Manual of Military Law and the Rules of Procedure. Indeed it was hardly fair that a man in his position should have to compete with such matters at a moment of emergency. It was one of those occasions when a soldier's work could really have been done better by a lawyer. Through his mind there flashed the words Mutiny, Sedition, Insubordination, Conduct to the Prejudice.—At last he had it. Riley had been guilty of two proper recognised crimes. He had both lost by neglect ammunition and had wilfully injured public property, to wit, shields, entrance, blockhouse, c-iron and shingle, one! Though the perspiration was streaming down it, the sergeant's brow cleared considerably, and he regarded the culprit somewhat less severely. After all a mistake was a mistake, and all of us are liable to them. It seemed a bit hard, he thought, as he gazed on the rather sulky and altogether dejected face of the marks-

man. He started to speak in a more kindly tone—

"Riley——" then paused.

Unluckily for the private, the visitors were now quite close behind the house, and the following words, pronounced in courteous accents, were quite audible—

"By the way, what was it you mentioned about *guns* having been used against you?"

The voice that replied was that of the skipper of the second train: "Oh, the N.C.O. in charge, sir, was under the firm impression that the blockhouse had been hit by a shell."

The sergeant winced and his kindly glance crystallised into a gleam. And as the procession, consisting of the Commandant Jakhal's Vlei, his staff, the commanders of both armoured trains, and three depressed mounted officers on foot, brought up by a shivering wet mangy dog, appeared round the entanglement, the clarion voice of duty rang out,

"—you're a prisoner!"

THE CULVERT ON THE SUMMIT.

I PUT my warm whisky-peg down on the table, and wrath against Jebson overcame me. I had come to this forsaken spot, five hundred miles out of my way, on purpose to see him. He had been barely civil, had given me an execrable dinner, warm drinks and fungus-eaten cheroots, and had gone to bed almost immediately after the meal and left me alone in the verandah.

Be rude to your enemy, feed him on chicken out of the Ark, give him mildewed smokes; but don't give him his drink warm during the first week of the rains in Lower Bengal, even if you mean to murder the brute during the night. I was, or had

been, Jebson's friend, and his reception of me rankled till, diving my hand into my pocket for my own cheroot-case, I pulled out a crumpled telegram. I read it again, and as I did so my anger faded :—

“Jebson is at Sampore sick. Look him up.—DALGREN.”

This deferred wire from Dalgren had reached me four days before, just as I was starting on my way home for a year's furlough, so I had left my up-country station a bit earlier in order to come round by Sampore. I had arrived that very evening, and had been fairly staggered at the change in Jebson. In the seedy, down-at-heel loafer, with the shifty eyes and unkempt hair, who had come to meet me at the station, I had utterly failed to recognise the dandy, my chum of former days. During dinner he had been reserved and furtive in manner, and had gone off to bed almost directly afterwards, declaring

he was utterly played out. Even drink, which was what I suspected, could not altogether explain the alteration in him.

At last I finished my smoke. As I got up to go to my room I remarked something odd about the legs of the long cane chair in which my friend had been sitting. Each of them rested on what looked like a squashed hedgehog. On picking up one of these things I found it was a little cloth cushion stuck all over with solid and thick bristles! While I was wondering what on earth it was for, I remembered another curious thing I had noticed when I had passed through Jebson's room in the dark on my way to dinner. As I had crossed the room I knocked up against the leg of the bed. Instantly I was badly pricked all up my shin.

"Jebson," I had shouted, for it was painful, "what the devil's this under your bed?"

"Where — where? Have you killed it?" was his answer as he rushed in.

“Killed it, you confounded idiot! I’ve nearly killed myself. What is it?”

I had then felt down the leg of the bed, and found it was about three feet high, made of iron, and covered with prickles at least an inch long. Jebson had looked sheepish and stammered out that it was a curio—that he was fond of curios.

Apparently here were some more of his curios in the verandah. Putting the bristly cushion down, I turned to go to my room and was soon in bed. But the creaking of the punkah, the drip of the rain outside, the buzz of the mosquitoes, and the stifling heat kept me awake. A muskrat sneaked twittering down the angle of the wall, a bat outside uttered the tiniest of shrieks as it fluttered up and down the verandah, and the whole dilapidated bungalow whispered with queer, small noises through its emptiness. At last all these sounds grew faint and merged into one, and I slowly dozed off.

I was suddenly aroused by a loud report,

and before I was fairly awake a second report rang through the bungalow. In an instant I was out of bed, stumbling through the dark towards the door into Jebson's bedroom, which I was able to locate because under the heavy curtain which hung across the doorway shone a flickering streak of light. As I burst through the curtain a strange sight met my eyes.

In a circle round the bed were several hurricane lanterns, all flaring high except two which were smoking heaps of broken glass and tin amid pools of blazing oil slowly creeping over the bare brick floor. Inside the lanterns was a ring of coir hawser drawn right round without a break. On two sides of the mosquito-net hanging over the bed were two large round holes with fiery rims, which as I looked grew and expanded like the burns made by a cigar-end in a sheet of blotting-paper. Through one of these holes protruded the muzzle of a double-barrelled shot-gun. The

air was full of oily smuts which rained down like a shower of little black tadpoles.

I rushed forward, tore down the mosquito-net, and found Jebson sitting up in bed, naked to the waist, holding a gun and staring at the broken lamp.

"Good Lord, what's up? Are you hurt?" I asked.

He only shook his head. Seeing that he was uninjured I flung the mosquito-net on the floor and stamped on it, then threw a door-mat over the pool of burning oil. When I turned round, Jebson, if you please, was opening the breech of his gun to reload.

"No, you don't!" said I, and wrenched the thing out of his hands.

"For heaven's sake, let me have it," he pleaded, "there'll be more here in a minute." He made a grab for the gun and got hold of it. In our struggle the poles of the mosquito-curtains were broken, and it was not till I knocked him back-

wards with my clenched fist that he gave in, suddenly breaking into heavy sobs. Then after a few moments he lay still. He was a revolting sight. The soots which covered his glistening chest and arms were all smeared into streaks of black so that he looked like a greased zebra. When he spoke again he talked quite sensibly.

"I want to explain, but I feel queer. Get me a drop of brandy, old chap."

"No," I answered, for my worst suspicions had been aroused. "Not by a long chalk. I've seen enough."

"Blandford — it's not that. I'm bad. Get me a little to pick me up, and I'll tell you all. I'm perfectly sensible now, but — don't laugh — I've been — I am — haunted by snakes — cobras." He spoke the last word in a hoarse whisper and looked round in obvious terror.

I thought as much. It was best to humour him, so I said sympathetically—

"I know — pink cobras, with purple

stripes, and green mongeese. They're all gone now. I've killed them all."

In his excitement he had half raised himself on the bed. He then flung himself back on the pillow with an impatient groan, and displayed some resentment, which gave me hopes.

"You've known me pretty long. I can see what you're driving at; but I think you should take my word. I've not touched a drop of liquor for the last year."

"Jebson," I said, dropping my sympathetic touch. "It's no good. You spend your nights sitting on a bed covered with prickles loosing off at lanterns with a shotgun. You fight like a madman, swear you're haunted by snakes, and expect me to believe that you don't dri——"

At this point Jebson interrupted my remarks by dropping back limply on to his pillow in a dead faint. I dashed into my room for my flask, and presently succeeded in forcing some of the brandy be-

tween his teeth. After a minute or two he came to.

"Look here. How did all this start?" I asked. "Bad go of fever?" This was a bit of *finesse*. Fever sends men off their heads, but I never knew it bring a man to seeing snakes afterwards.

He sat up and sighed.

"Half a minute," I interrupted. "I can't stand this putrid atmosphere any longer. Why, you haven't even got a punkah. It's awful; come into my room."

As we crossed the floor he suddenly gripped my arm and stood staring at a narrow space between two boxes. His face seemed frozen. At first I could see nothing; but when I lifted my lantern I discovered the black-and-drab shining body of a cobra between the cases.

"It's no good killing them," he said resignedly. "They swarm. I've shot two in here to-night." Hence the shattered lanterns.

However, as the brute was gliding out,

I tipped a saddle-box on to its tail. Back went its head, hood spread, with that horrid "th—th" which, once heard, is never forgotten. It struck at the wood till I hit it on the head with a polo stick.

Jebson then went absolutely gugga, and got into a frenzy. He seized the polo stick and beat the squirming body into a bleeding pulp, all the while using the very worst language — English and Hindustani. It was some time before I could get him to leave the mangled carcase. My room seemed almost cold after the Turkish bath we had just left, and I put a blanket round Jebson, who sat on my bed. He said he could smell snakes, and made me look in the verandah to see if there were any more. Then I lit a cheroot, determined to make a night of it, and hear his yarn while he was willing to tell it. He might change his mind by next day.

After a few minutes silence he began :
"This thing commenced two years ago, and since then my life has been a burden to me.

I've had hallucinations, and some of it is due to imagination, but not all. I know that I am always being attacked by snakes, especially cobras. At first it was not so bad, but it has gradually got worse and worse. It is a damnably snaky district, and you can guess what it's like in the rains. This bungalow swarms with the brutes. You saw to-night? I've lost five dogs, and have had to give up keeping them. I've tried all sorts of precautions. Mongeese—all die. Had a belt cleared round the bungalow—it's rolled and weeded every day. Had the place lit up at night. All no good. Still they come. I've gone in for further measures. I had cushions made of bristles under my chairs. I dare say you spotted 'em?"

I nodded.

"I then had the bed with prickly legs made, also a horsehair rope laid round it every night."

"What's that for?" I asked.

"Oh, I read somewhere—or some one

told me—that snakes will never cross horse-hair. I started lamps all round my bed, gave up a punkah for mosquito-curtains, and go to bed with a gun; and I seem to spend my nights shooting the brutes. Strange thing is that though I have killed hundreds I've not found many bodies in the morning."

"Don't your servants come in when they hear the gun?" I asked.

"No, they daren't. I've just had a bad bout, and haven't slept till daylight for a month now, and I'm about done."

"Why, man, it's this cursed climate. Go on leave—that'll put you right. You don't mean to tell me you've been here for two years?"

"I have. Daren't ask for leave. They'd find out what's wrong, jeer about blue snakes and pink rats, and put it down to drink, as you did. Brudley, the manager, has a down on me already. I should get the sack. No. I must stick it out." He paused. "The truth is that I practically

though unintentionally committed a murder, and this is the retribution. You know, this infernal line of mine along the delta, with its miles of embankments, is always being breached in the rains, when the whole country is flooded and the water can't get away. Of course, as part of my job, I am liable to be called out at any time, night or day, to repair any break in my section. One night last year, about ten days after the beginning of the monsoon, I got a wire soon after dinner to say there was a wash-out about seven miles up the line. It was raining solid, just as it is now; and I was pretty sick, for I had spent the last two days on a similar job. But I was obliged to put out and do my best. I had to trolley, as Sampore is not an engine station, and I'd only one trolley coolie, the other having died of cholera—which is endemic in this sweet spot. But he was a very good man, and I know he could easily take me seven miles. I wired to Jhuthganj—the nearest engine station—

for a loco and ballast train to follow as soon as possible, and started off in the pitch dark. We hadn't gone a mile before Gungoo——"

"Who's Gungoo?" I said.

"The trolley man. He began to get afraid because he thought he saw lots of snakes on the line. I told him to shut up and shove ahead. Meanwhile I sat looking out in front to see the line was clear. The lantern lit up the metals for some distance, but the light did not strike the ground for a few yards in front, and between that point and the trolley was inky dark. On each side of the embankment was water stretching for miles. After another couple of miles Gungoo, who had been paddling along steadily, again spoke—

"Sahib, there are too many snakes. They are cobras. I am afraid.'"

"I didn't believe him for a moment, and asked how he could tell."

"I hear them speak, sahib, and I have touched two.'"

“He then began to whimper and climbed up on the end of the trolley. I don’t know why I was so annoyed, but I took up my gun, which I always had with me, and swore I’d shoot him if he didn’t get down. Of course the thing was not loaded. The poor devil got down, and began shoving again as fast as he could. I then thought I’d have a look myself, and I tipped up the lantern so that the light fell immediately in front of the wheels. By Jove, Blandford, I counted four largish snakes in about two hundred yards, and was turning round to tell Gungoo to get up when he gave a yell, which nearly made me fall off the trolley, climbed up again, and howled out that he had been bitten. I sat him in my chair, tore open the tiffin-basket, and poured some brandy down his throat. He didn’t want to take it, but he was too knocked out to resist—you know how easily these chaps knuckle under—and was already half dead. I knew enough about it to try and keep him from going to sleep

at any cost, so I made him get down, and we both pushed the trolley along. I did all the work while he hung on and kept his legs going; but he lagged more and more, then all at once staggered and fell, and was dragged hanging on to the handles for some twenty feet before I could pull up. I ordered him to stand up, I beat him, and threatened him with my gun; but it was no good. So I picked him up, put him back into the chair, and emptied my flask into him. By that time his leg was all puffed up and shiny, and his face had turned a dirty grey-green.

“After about ten minutes he opened his eyes, and said that he was going to die, and asked me to look after his family. Then his head sank forward. I worked his arms and tried to keep him going, but he was a goner. His whole body was swollen, and wherever I touched him it left a dent. His heart had stopped beating. You can imagine my feelings, for I had killed him through sheer pig-headed

incredulity. Poor devil! However, I could do no good sitting there; and as the need for me to get ahead was just as urgent as ever, I decided to walk on.

"I picked up the lantern and flag, and plugged ahead. I don't know why I took the flag, for it could not have been of any use to me at night. In fact, I didn't realise I had it in my hand until afterwards. Suddenly down went my left leg. I saw stars, and then a blank. The next thing was that I found myself in the pitch dark lying on some wet ballast. It was some time before I remembered what had happened.

"I tried to get up, but a pain like a red-hot nail in my left ankle made me sink back. I went at it again very slowly and cautiously, and by degrees slewed my body round so that I was sitting on one rail. My foot was caught somehow, and though I managed to screw it round a bit and cut the bootlace I couldn't free it. My ankle was throbbing like a pulsometer.

"The lantern must have swung out of my hand right into the water, for there was no trace of it, not even a spark. I could see nothing, and hadn't the vaguest idea of where I was. As I looked about me trying to pierce the black, the murmuring of water close by told me that I was somewhere near a culvert through which the flood was rushing. I then perceived, rather than saw, something opposite me on the other side of the bank. I was puzzled by it for some time, but it gradually dawned upon me that it was a grade-post. A double gradient-post about fifty yards from a culvert! That gave me the clue. I realised my whereabouts. I was at the summit of two gradients, about five miles from the station.

"Just then a yarn that Ruffell had told me when he handed over the section came into my mind—a yarn which I had taken for a rather ingenious lie and promptly forgotten——"

For Jebson to be calmly talking of other men's lies struck me as curious.

“He had been gassing,” he continued, “about the monsoon and the floods and the large numbers of snakes which at such times collected on the embankment. He swore that the brutes kept between the rails, and that however gentle a grade was they always spotted it and travelled uphill; he also said that at a summit, where two streams of snakes met, there was a regular Piccadilly Circus of snakes, simply jostling each other till they found a way out.

“I’d never thought again of all this rot. Now I tried in vain to put it out of my head. I tried to persuade myself that I did not hear the roar of the water; that it was not a double grade-post in front of me. But it was no good. I knew where I must be, and the sweat trickling down my back ran cold. I hunted for my match-box; but of course it was with my cheroot-case in the tiffin-basket on the trolley.

“I was in the dark, unable to get away, and practically defenceless. I had the flag of course, and the bamboo was a stout one;

but, after all, what was the good of a yard of stick against brutes I could not see? How the deuce was I to know when one of them was coming? There I sat quite still, scarcely daring to move. Presently above the sound of the water I seemed to hear a faint, queer noise along the line to my right. For some time I was not certain it really was anything, or whether my fancy was playing tricks. The noise was not louder than the murmur of the waters, but was quite distinct from it and much nearer—as if a wood shaving were being gently dragged over the ballast. On it came, closer and closer! It was a snake, a cobra! All snakes were potential cobras to me there in the dark.

“There was a pause. It had stopped. Had it smelt me? Could cobras smell? Could they see in the dark? As these queries darted through my mind I made up my plan of action. I would stay absolutely still till the beast was quite close—within range of my stick; then one

clever, sweeping blow, and with luck I should disable it before it got the alarm. Anyway, hit or miss, the brute would certainly hiss, and then I could locate my next blow by the sound. My eyes ached with trying to see in the darkness. Suddenly it came on again. Why was it so slow? It seemed to take hours to cover a yard. I held my breath. Now, I judged, it was eight feet away—now seven—six—five! I could reach five feet. I gave one almighty swipe round horizontally and hit the empty air! There was an angry hiss and a scuffling on the ballast. I took aim by the sound and aimed another blow. Same result,—I hit nothing, and nearly threw my arm out of its socket.

“It was awful. The beast might be much farther away than I imagined, and I might have alarmed it to no purpose. Reaching out as far as I could, I drew the point of my stick in an arc from rail to rail. It touched no snake, but the hissing went on regularly with each breath

the beast took. It was again approaching. I again let fly, and this time the stick felt as if it had struck a bit of dangling rope. As I let out a couple more horizontal blows the hissing redoubled, and bits of mud and gravel spurted up. My next stroke hit nothing. I therefore knew that the creature's head was down, and I rained blows on the ballast from rail to rail, till I was afraid of smashing the stick. I then felt round gingerly with the point to make sure that the brute had not closed in on me. I knew that its back must be broken in several places, but it could still bite if within range.

“The scuffling became weaker and gradually died away ; and I had barely made up my mind that this snake was dead when a fresh scraping, creeping sound to my left brought me back to my situation. I painfully faced round to the left, in which direction I could not reach far. The noise approached slowly and fitfully, stopped for minutes at a time, and then came on again.

I had no doubts this time as to what it was, but the suspense of waiting was so great that I felt inclined to shout—to defy the brute to come on,—anything to break the spell. At one moment it seemed almost within reach. Then it halted. I waited expectant for the smallest movement. Could it glide on without any sound? Had it escaped under the rail? Had it gone to sleep?

“While these doubts were torturing me I heard another rustle approaching on my right at a brisk pace. If I turned towards this last comer I should probably arouse the sleeping horror on my left. But Number Three came along steadily without any pause or delay, and I felt that if I did not stop it it might butt right into me, so I turned to meet it as quietly as I could.

“With my left ear I was listening intently for any movement of Number Two, whilst my right was noting the steady rustle of the newcomer. At last I judged

it to be well within reach, and I let out. I must have caught it fairly, because I felt its carcase lift to my stick, and heard the thud of its fall just outside the rails. I at once turned to my left as a vicious hiss struck my ears, and I was not a bit too soon, for I caught Number Two half-way up the bamboo. I hit till the hissing on my left ceased, and then laced into the ballast vaguely at Number Three which was still moving. I didn't know if I was hitting Number Three or the dead body of Number One, or nothing at all. And I didn't care. I rained blows anyhow and anywhere. My rage turned to frenzy. Then things became blurred and half visible — part of a hideous nightmare: I seemed to spend countless ages sitting there striking. Snakes came up in battalions on each side. They grinned at me. I mowed down dozens at a blow. But it was hopeless. It was like cutting grass with a scythe; for each stroke cleared a space which showed a fresh row of expanded

hoods behind. I kept on hitting without pause till my arm felt like a bar of white-hot steel. A rosy glow came over everything. A wall of dead reptiles grew up on each side and fresh hordes climbed over the top. The wall grew and grew, shutting out the blood-red light. Things began to buzz and jigger and go round. The wall closed over my head; and everything went out with a purple bang——”

Jebson had grown intensely excited towards the end of this marvellous yarn, and was barking out short staccato sentences, and when he ceased speaking the tumbler which he had been holding shivered to pieces in his clutch and he suddenly collapsed. I straightened him out comfortably on the bed and put a blanket over him. Dawn was just breaking as I dragged in a long-chair from the verandah and lay down. When I awoke it was ten o'clock. At twelve Jebson opened his eyes. He looked at me steadily for some time and then said—

“Blandford, do you believe what I told you?”

I was considering my answer when I caught his eye watching me hungrily. That decided me.

“Yes.”

I stopped at the monosyllable. As a matter of fact, I did not believe a word of it. The tale Ruffell had told him had evidently worked upon him when weak from fever, and subsequently drink must have assisted the fever. I could not help smiling as I recalled the “wall of cobras,” the “rosy light,” and the “purple bang.” This last was distinctly fresh: and yet I knew what he meant. When one has fever, both noises and smells have colours.

Then—to cut a long story short—I spent two hours trying to persuade him to put in for his leave, and only finally succeeded in working on his good nature. If he didn’t do as I wanted I threatened to wire to my headquarters, put off my passage for a week or two, and interview the manager

of the railway. I laid great stress on my desire to get home, and the disappointment and expense that delay would be to me. Jebson's only reason against doing as I wanted was his fear that the Management would not understand his case and would sack him.

However, I helped him to write out an application for leave without making any mention of snakes; and we made all sorts of plans, and promised ourselves a great time at home. After that I felt free to go on my journey; Jebson came down to see me off, and as the train steamed out of the station he said, laughing, "To-day five weeks I shall dine with you at the club. Don't forget the oysters."

The train crawled slowly along, and I lay in my bunk sweating and grumbling and ruminating over the whole affair. How lucky I had turned up! The poor devil would have drunk himself to death in a month or so. But my conscience began to prick me that I had not done the right

thing in leaving him. He might get another bad fit, might cancel his leave, or it might not be sanctioned; lots of things might prevent his getting away.

My frame of mind was particularly evil towards monsoons and narrow-gauge railways, when at last, towards evening, we came to a long halt at some wayside station. Ten minutes passed, twenty minutes, half an hour, and I heard the Eurasian guard conferring with the babu station-master in chee-chee.

"What the dickens is up, Babu? When are we going on?" I inquired.

"How can I tell, sir? I have the report, which arrived to me at fifteen o'clock, that the Kali Naadi Bridge at mile 534 is entirelee washed away. I have accordingly made *bandobast* to take mails across in the countree boats, and have arranged for them since three hours, your honour, but up to date no boat is to hand. These are terrible times, your honour: what can poor station-master do? Perhaps your honour shall

consult with Mr Esmith. Every precaution will be taken with your baggage."

"Damn Mr Smith!" I said. "You are responsible for the boats being here, Babu; and I shall report you to the Traffic Manager for neglect of duty."

"Sir, I beg of you to consider me. Your honour, it is not my culpabilitee. I have undertaken great responsibilittee——"

I was sick of this. "Who and where is Mr Smith?"

"He is the European engine-driver, sir. He is now sittin' on the locomot——"

I did not wait for more. I walked along the train and found a fat, red-faced man swabbing down a lubricator with a piece of waste.

"Good-evening," I said. "Is there any chance of our crossing to-night?"

"Not for me, sir—with this wash-out. There will be some boats here soon for the mails, and you will be able to get acrost with them."

"I suppose they *will* turn up?" I asked

anxiously. "I want to catch the mail-boat."

"Oh, you'll be all right, sir. This sort of game is always happening on this line, and we're quite accustomed to transshipping a whole trainload into boats, let alone mails. The boats 'ull be 'ere soon—should be 'ere now—and you'll find a train waiting for you on the other side. Thank 'ee, sir; I don't mind if I do," as he took a proffered cheroot.

I was relieved. "The station-master does not seem to know much about it; he's off his head with excitement."

"'E's all right, sir, is Babu Gopal Dass—that is, when it's all plain sailing. It's only when there's anything unusual as 'e loses 'is 'ead. 'E's probably ordered these boats hours ago; and because they are not 'ere to the tick 'e gets so *gebrowed* 'e dunno what 'e's doing. Why, my fireman 'ere, Jinab Ally, loses 'is 'ead whenever he can. Nearly ran over the D.E. not so long ago—didn't-cher, Ally, my boy?"

“Sahib, *mera kasoor*,” whined the grinning Ali, whose shining face was frosted over with coal-dust till it looked like a charcoal biscuit.

As I could do nothing but wait, I was quite willing to while away the time by having a chat with the oily engine-driver, and to make things more friendly and to lubricate his memory, I produced my flask.

“Er—how was that?” I asked.

“It was near as can be two years ago. Why, you know the D.E.—’e come down to Sampore station to see you off. Funny Jebson—beg pardon, sir, Mr Jebson—the District Engineer—I mean. We calls ’im ‘Funny Jebson’ on the line, ’cos ’e ’as fancies about snakes and sech. Not that I wonder at it, poor man.”

I felt inclined to rebuke this fat red-faced mechanic for his disrespectful manner of talking of Jebson; but after all I should do no good and perhaps lose the yarn, so I held my peace.

"Yes," he continued, ruminatively, "taking it all in all, it was a queer show. Perhaps, sir, you'd like to 'ear about it?" And he went on before I had time to answer.

"One night—in the thick of the rain, it was, when the whole country was under water—I was at Jhutganj, which you must know is forty miles this side of Sampore. We 'ad just run into the shed and Ally 'ad drawed the fire, when I gets an order that I 'ad to take out a ballast train and breakdown gang to a place seven miles on the up side of Sampore for to repair one of these breaches. It fairly gave me the 'ump. I 'ad been out the other way for two nights, an' I wanted a bit of sleep.

"Well, the ballast train was always kep' ready; and as soon as the coolies were collected and steam was up, out we went. It was rainin' steady, and was as dark as the inside of a fish. We couldn't see through the window of the cab for rain-drops, an' we might run into some bloomin'

noo breach on our own accord for all we knew. We passed Sampore at three-thirty, an' the station-master tells me that the district engineer had gone on ahead, an' that I should find him at the wash-out an' take 'is orders—gone on in 'is trolley. When we got about four miles out it was just beginning to dawn, an' a sickly kind of grey-green light over everything. You could see the line straight ahead, and the dark-grey floods on either side as far as the eye could reach. My eyes ached, and I was feelin' the beginnings of a go of fever. Suddenly Ally, 'oo was looking out, sings out, 'There's something ahead!' and jammed on the brake.

"I shuts off steam, and reverses immediately. I had the fear of some new wash-out in my mind. 'Owever we weren't doing over fifteen miles, and we pulls up very short. As I gets down I see a trolley on the line, with some one sitting on it, not more than fifty yards away, so we walks up to it. The tail lamp 'ad burnt out, and

there was a coolie sprawling over the chair. 'Well,' I says to Ally, 'this is a rum start! What's this *soor* doing sleeping in this chair and endangering the traffic?' With that I gives 'im a jab, and yanks 'im out of it; an' 'e fell all of a 'eap.

"If you believe me, sir, 'e was dead—dead as mutton; been dead some time, and reeked of brandy. I jest stood still an' stared. Then I noticed 'is body was puffy like, an' one leg was swole up big as the chimney of this engine—an' I side stepped. Ally began pulling 'im about.

"'Get out, you fat'ead!' I says. 'It's cholera! I'm off. Let 'im alone!'

"Ally didn't pay no sort of attention, but pointed to the man's ankle, and shouts out—

"'Mila, sahib.'

"'Mila,' says I. 'What have you *mila'd*? Leave him alone.'

"'Not cholera,' says Ally. 'Cobra.'

"I looked a bit closer, an' there, on his ankle, were the small marks of a snake-

bite. That explained the smell of brandy, which ain't usual about a coolie. Ally said 'e knoo 'im, an' 'e was one of the D.E.'s trolley coolies, and the trolley was the D.E.'s, so the D.E. himself must have shoved on ahead on 'is flat feet. It was no use waiting there, an' we moved the poor chap off the trolley, lifted it on one side, and drove on. We 'ad not gone above 'arf a mile farther when this time I see something on the road. It was moving, too. I tells Ally an' reverses. Ally takes a look; an' instead of putting on the brakes, if you please, 'e wanted to drive through it. Said it was the coolie's ghost.

“ ‘Ghosts!’ says I. ‘Rats! Put on the brake, you lunatic.’

“But 'e wouldn't: an' when I steps forward to do it, 'e clung round my legs, beggin' me not to do it. Meanwhile, we was slowly running on to it, whatever it was. I didn't get the brake on until I give Ally two in the jaw which made 'im let go. Only jest in time, too: we pulled

up about a dozen yards short of it. I gets down off the footplate an' looks.

"Ally—why, it makes me larf now when I thinks of it—Ally, 'e was trying to 'ide 'is 'ead with lumps of coal, same like a woman does in the bedclothes.

"It was lighter now, an' I could see as it was a man. 'E was setting on one rail, with 'is legs acrost the track. 'Is face was all bloody; 'e 'ad no 'at, an' was muttering. 'E took no sort of notice of me; 'is eyes 'ad a fixed glare in them, an' every now an' then he feebly waves a stick with bits of green rag fastened to it. I own I didn't like it, an' 'ad 'arf a mind to get on the footplate an' go back to Sampore. It was onnatural; an' Ally's whining, an' what all, 'ad made me jumpy. 'Owever, I stands my ground, an' sees a lot of bits of rope lying round on each side of him. Ally 'ad meanwhile plucked up and follered me, soft-footed, and gives me quite a turn by suddenly whispering in my ear, 'It's Jebson Sahib.' Then I spots 'im. It was

Mr Jebson, sir. I goes closer, an' the bits of rope round 'im were dead and dyin' cobras! I counted seventeen."

"Seventeen cobras?"

"That's right — seventeen; an' some remarkably fine ones, too! It was crool. I have the biggest in sperrits at 'ome now. Well, I looked at that image settin' there, an' I tell you I didn't fancy 'aving to go and pick 'im out of 'is nest. 'Is nose was broken, which 'elped to disguise 'im, an' 'is eyes were wide open and fixed like a dead man's. 'E never so much as winked. Well, we——"

"Your honour, the countree boats have now safely arrived, and the mails are loaded. Your honour's baggage is on board. Will you kindly embark?" sounded the oily voice of the Babu, who had come up.

"Half a minute, Babu," I said.

"Sir, train and tide wait for no man. Her Majesty's mails——"

"Go to——" I roared, and he scuttled

like a rabbit to the shelter of his office, whence he shouted—

“I shall telegraph that Her Majesty’s mails are being delayed by unauthorised persons of European extraction.”

But I did not heed him. I turned to Smith.

“Well, we took ’im back, an’ ’e was orf ’is ’ead for six weeks. I don’t know ’ow it all happened. Really, there’s a lot of yarns up and down the line, but I’ve never asked Mr Jebson ’isself—’e is a bit stand-offish—so I can’t tell you the rights of it. I only knows what I see myself. You’d better be movin’, sir. It would be jest like Gopal Dass to send the boats off without you.”

I got off my little seat in the cab, and shook the driver’s hand.

“Good-bye, sir. I ’ope you’ll find all well in the old country. I wish I was going with you.”

I threw a rupee to Ali, and ran towards the river, my bearer leading.

The remainder of my journey was uneventful; but owing to two more delays I only just caught my ship, and had no time to interview Jebson's manager, nor did I write, because I thought a letter might possibly do more harm than good. A personal interview would have been so much better.

Close upon five weeks afterwards I was sitting in the club thinking about ordering that dinner, not forgetting the oysters, when I happened to notice the following in the 'Homeward Mail':—

"JEBSON.—At Sampore, suddenly, from snake-bite, on —, WILLIAM THEODORE JEBSON, District Engineer on the Rajputana, Chittagong, and Tuticorin Railway."

SERGEANT SNODGRASS

“With the utmost rigour of the law.”

As the train jolted over the points outside a big junction I put down the book and looked out of the window.

We soon ran into the station. To hoarse shouts of “Basingstoke, Winchester, and Southampton — S’uthampton train,” the compartment I was in drew up opposite the exit from the platform, where a truculent collector who was busy snatching tickets from the outgoing crowd had just started a heated altercation with a quiet but determined-looking individual. This passenger appeared to be a man of

substance, and not of a sort to be brow-beaten. He displayed light-coloured spats over well-polished, square-toed boots, and wore one of those mongrel hats which are half bowler, half topper, and are much affected by retired military officers, bailiffs, land-agents, and some farmers. To me the hat was a sign, for I have discovered in my short experience of life that the wearer of this type of headgear is not the sort of man to be trampled on, especially when he has whiskers. This passenger had whiskers. He grew the more bland and self-assured the more the ticket-collector blustered. Finally, fumbling in his pocket, he produced a visiting-card, which he handed to the excited railway man. There was a sudden and almost painful change in the official's manner, and he said something. One could guess the words from his demeanour. "I beg your pardon, sir, I'm sure. I did not know who it was, sir!" He not only touched his hat,

but took the trouble to change his ticket punch from one hand to the other in order to do it.

The passenger neither smiled nor spoke, but passed out majestically, while there ensued a whispered conference between the crestfallen official and the porter who was carrying the stranger's solid leather, waterproof-covered, heavily-initialled suitcase. The collector stared wistfully down the stairs after his late opponent, and was so unmanned by what had happened that he allowed two individuals, whose humble appearance was a positive invitation to bullying, to pass out unchallenged. The victorious passenger might have been a general officer, a peer of the realm, or even a director of the Company, for his opponent's attitude of distressed surprise warranted any conjecture. As the train started and the latter moved out of the field of view of my window, he took off his peaked cap, rubbed the inside of it with his handkerchief, and thoughtfully

readjusted the red tie at the back of his tired-looking celluloid collar.

Two of my travelling companions—I was in a second-class smoking carriage—had been watching this little scene with as much interest as I had, and one jumped up laughing, put his head out of the window and stared at the discomfited official till we ran out of the station. He turned to his companion. “Get that, Jim—eh?”

Jim nodded.

“See the poor devil’s face?”

“Yes; I guess he was barking up the wrong tree. Wonder who the boss was; director or general manager, likely. Never saw a man’s jaw drop so sudden; must have hurt his feet. Good as a play. It’ll learn that inspector chap to watch it a bit.”

He paused, then added regretfully—

“Shan’t see these fellers with their red ties for some time.”

“Never seen a man’s face fall so bad

as that but once; then it was worse," added the first speaker, as he chuckled in a reminiscent manner. He was a pleasant-looking fellow, with a tanned face. There were touches of grey on his temples and in his beard, and his humorous eyes were deeply wrinkled at the corners. Both the men wore mouse-coloured soft felt hats, and clothes which were newish but badly cut. Sundry comparisons as to the merits of various Union-Castle boats had already enabled me to place them as British South Africans returning to the land of their adoption. The one opposite me was smoking a pipe having a swollen bowl with a wire cover to it. He had already twice filled it with some curious flaky tobacco which smelt abominably. He chuckled to himself for some moments, then leaned forward, and, in spite of the notice facing him, quietly but firmly spat on the floor. At any other moment I might have resented this insanitary action, but he did it in quite a friendly way

without prejudice. Besides, I nosed a story.

"I can't but laugh when I think of it still," he added. "It was the best bit I had seen in the whole blessed war."

His pal was a stolid person, and I was afraid he would not rise to the occasion. But he slowly removed his pipe and saved the situation.

"What was that?"

"Ever meet 'Sergeant Snodgrass'?"

The stolid one shook his head.

"Not old Jackie Toney?"

Again a silent reply in the negative.

"No? Well, it was to him it happened. It was in his push I was serving. His right name was Captain John Bernard, and he commanded our battalion. He was an Imperial officer — I've forgotten his proper regiment, but with us he was a Major — local or irregular rank they called it; *you* know."

"Thought it was Colonel Grayson bossed up your lot."

"No, not when we lay in Joh'burg. It was Major Bernard, as I'm a-telling you of. 'Jackie' we called him because we liked him; 'Toney' 'cos he had such a haw-haw manner of speaking. 'Come heaw, my man—d'you heaw?' and all that outfit. He was a white man and plucky, but what especially took us about him was his sense of fun. This—what I am going to tell you about—wouldn't have happened to nobody else; they wouldn't have seen it coming. Old Jackie smelt it all night and nursed it; I believe he enjoyed it more than any of us."

"*Nursed it?*"

"That's right; I'm coming to that."

His pipe was out and, as if about to refill, he thoughtfully tapped out the ashes into the window casing. In self-defence I leaned forward and offered my cigar-case.

"Thank you, sir, I will. We don't smoke so many cigars up on the Rand as we used to before October '99."

He lit up and continued—

“You know when we was lying in Joh’burg part of 1901? We were on sort of military police duty, as they called it, but it was really outposts. It was there that we first struck martial law, to deal with first hand in a manner of speaking. I’m not looking for any more martial law; thank you.”

“Why not?” I interposed, on the strength of the accepted weed. “It could not have done you much harm. You were one of an army in occupation of conquered territory, I take it.”

“Don’t you believe it, sir—not a word of it. There was not much conquering army about us. Things had been fairly plain sailing before, but when the administration of martial law was included in our duties we did not know what had struck us. There was military law for us, and there was martial law for every one else, so they said; but amongst it all there was civil law, and of course running in and out of everything like mites in a cheese — there was

lawyers, barristers, attorneys, solicitors, advocates, public notaries, legal advisers, estate agents, auctioneers, sworn appraisers, actuaries, and God knows what all. I made a list of 'em once. But who was who, and who was where, and where we was, was a puzzle. And it was not the foreigners that gave most trouble, mind you, not by a long chalk. They all seemed to know something about it, and said that our regulations were child's play. No, it was our own freeborn British and British Colonials who groused and objected and did all the kicking.

"We were called police; but we carried rifles and wore filled bandoliers. All the police stations were entrenched and loop-holed and sandbagged and entangled ready for a fight at any moment, and we did have a good number of scraps. One moment 'twould be—'Halt, who goes there?'—and empty your magazine; the next 'twould be—'Would you be so kind as to be so good as to stop while I see who you are, if you please?' We were told by the Major that

if we let any of the *enemy* through he would try us by court-martial for something or other. I've forgotten the crime, but I remember that the punishment for it on active service was death! On the other 'and, we were told, if you please, that if we shot any person who would not halt, and he turned out to be an innocent, well-behaved, peaceable burgher who had left his rifle behind, we would be tried by civil court for manslaughter! An easy game to pick and choose by night?"

"Quite," I said, sympathetically. "Did you say *manslaughter*?"

"That's right. Can you believe it—manslaughter in war? I always thought before I done my little bit of service that that was what we were there for. Anyway, things got to such a pitch that some of our fellows asked leave to hand in their rifles and be served out with pillows and scent squirts! A few turned it up and took their discharge. They said it was too double-ended a business for them, as

we were bound to get it in the neck anyway between all the different sorts of law."

His tone was heated, and we seemed to be wandering somewhat from the main point of Major John Bernard's adventure to controversial topics, so I interposed a soothing remark—

"Of course the transition period between a state of war and a state of peace is a very difficult one for jurisprudence——"

"Jury's prudence? Why, that's the very word the blighter used."

"What—er—blighter?" My tongue did not take kindly to the expression, but I had to walk warily.

"Why, the chap I'm telling you about. I dessay you're right; but there was a sight more of peace than there was of the other thing. Anyway, what I'm referrin' to happened this way: it was part of our job to try and stop Boers from getting supplies out of the town, and many's the night we spent lying out on the *veld* for to

surprise parties trying to get in or out. Old Jackie was much keener on this part of the business than on issuing passes and taking the census, and for us it certainly was a sight more interesting than patrolling the townships and mines and juggling Peruvians for peddling liquor to Kaffirs. He was a great hand at nosing out intelligence, was Jackie, but *we* never knew till we started off on one of our all *fresco* picnics where it was to be. We were at different stations, and used to reinforce each other for these jobs. I was at Bantjes myself when some of us were ordered to roll up on a certain evening to join the Jenssen's lot. You remember the old Jenssen's Hotel, Jim?"

A nod was the only answer.

"Well, that night about twenty of us started off on foot from the hotel, Major Jackie in command. Lieutenant Brassard, the detachment officer, was out in another direction. Jackie had got the office that the French Eyetalian commando in the

Gatsrand was sending in a little lot to get grub from somewhere near the Village Deep tailings."

"French Italian commando?" I asked.

"That's what they called it. It was an international crowd of all sorts of murderers and thieves really—riff-raff from the mines. We were going to lay up for this lot in one of the suburbs where there was an opening between the blue gum plantations laid out as a street in the township, with a row of unfinished houses which would give good cover. Everything went all right, and we were soon fixed up along one side of this open space so that the enemy would not have a dog's chance if they came. The Major had arranged it so that they was to be allowed to come almost through before we hands-upped them.

"Old Jim 'Umphreys was with me alongside the Major, and we soon snuggled down to wait. I mind that evening well even now. There was a stink of mortar about the founds of the unfinished houses, and

the mosquitoes had a benefit off us. It was a lovely night, not too cold, and we could see the lights on the mines along the Reef. A good many was working again then, and when the breeze, which was sighing like in gentle puffs through the blue gums, dropped we could hear the roar of the batteries. It was waves of sound—just like the surf. Our cousin Jacks from Cornwall always used to say it reminded him of Land's End."

"But was there an action going on?"

"Bless you, no, sir; I don't mean artillery; I mean the mine batteries with the stamps falling—just a roar. 'Course I had often heard it before and often have since, but I don't lie out on the *veld* much for choice now, and somehow that evening comes back to me special. The stars were very bright, and bar the creaking of some of the corrugated iron, there was no sound but the rustling of the trees and this far-off roar. Suddenly some one near me—the Major I think it was—started to scratch

himself. He knocked over a loose sheet of iron, and down came a lot of bricks on to more iron below. There was a hell of a clatter, and you could hear the snick of cut-offs being opened all down the line. I forgot to mention that just behind us there was a completed and inhabited house with a garden and all. Well, no sooner had these bricks fallen than a dog in this garden set up an all-fired barking. We waited for the beast to settle down; but it went on making noise enough to wake the dead. The Major swears a bit and then says, 'Come on, Martin,' that's me, 'and you, 'Umphries. We must stop this infernal din. It will alarm every one within a hundred miles.' And off we went up to the house. There was the dog doing even time round a sort of kraal, and trying his level to get out. The house was a nice little piece with a *stoep* all covered with creepers. The Major bangs at the door. He had to kick and knock several times before anybody answers. Then out comes

a young feller on to the *stoep*. He wore a striped sleeping suit and carried a lantern.

“‘Look here,’ he says. ‘Watch you Khakies want?’

“‘You must tie up your dog. He’s barking and disturbing what I’m doing heaw,’ says Tony, quite polite, but firm, in his usual manner. ‘His noise may spoil my plan.’

“‘Oh, go to hell with you plan,’ says young Stripes. ‘The dog is my dog and he’s on my property,’ he says. ‘And he can do what he likes, and so can I. I won’t have you men messin’ about here and worryin’ me with your dam nonsense.’

“‘I must tell you that we was all dressed alike. We were all mounted men on this job and wore gaiters and ‘British warms,’ and the Major carried a Morzer.”

“‘What was that?’ I asked.

“‘A carbine that we took off the Boers. They were armed with Morzers, same as we had the Lee-Enfield.’”

"Of course, yes," I hastily replied, feeling rather small. He went on—

"Jim and I held our breath. For all his manners old Tony was not a man to be sent to hell without some back chat. When we heard him clear his throat just in the way he always did before he let fly, we felt sorry for young Tooty-Frooty in flannelette.

"‘Eughrrr—’ he says very loud. Then he stopped sudden as if something struck him. He looked round at me and Jim, and though we couldn’t see his face we *felt* ’im wink.

"‘Eughrrr—’ says he. ‘I’m sorry, sir’— ‘*Sir,*’ mind you—‘but I ’ave my orders to carry out. This is war time and your dog’s noise is spoiling my game. I must insist on your tying him up.’

"‘I shall do nothing of the sort. I am a loyal British subject and this is my house and garden, and I can do what I please inside of my own fence. If you put your foot inside of it it’s trespass, and I’ll have

the law of the whole lot of you damned Tommies coming prowling about disturbing peaceful inhabitants. Go away at once.'"

"Do you mean to say he talked like that in war time?" I said. The youth certainly had a case, but was overstating it.

"I do that. He was an Afrikander, and thought he was dealing with a crowd of fresh men out from the Old Country. You see, he didn't know the Major, nor me, nor old Jim by sight. Many's the time that these slim gentry did bluff Thomas Atkins by tall talk that way. We weren't Regulars any of us, and had seen a bit more, and we quite sympathised with the men just out from home, where they seem to be trodden on so much all round that they'd suck down any hot air ladled out to them by a plausible gas-bag even in war, so long as he wore plain clothes."

"What d'you mean by trodden on? D'you mean their officers——"

"No, I do not. Their officers are all right and seem to get walked on too. I

mean that the men were not taught to hold their own with the rest of the population, and to consider themselves as good as the best. They're always being ordered to keep off the grass. Why, I'm told that in many a dirty pot-house they'll serve any scum with plain clothes on him when they'll refuse to serve a decent soldier in uniform; the same in music halls and theatres."

"I think that's all altered now," I replied.

"And time too. The men that came out then fought better than any of us, but when it came to the confidence-trick palaver, they were a gift, a dead snip every time. Well, the Major used to talk to us a lot about this, and we had our eyes open, consequently we weren't half pleased when we tumbled to what was on on this outfit."

"‘I'm very sorry, sir,' he says, slick as any head-waiter; ‘you don't seem to realise that this is war time, an' if you don't tie up your dog dam quick I'll shoot 'im. As

you were—I won't shoot him; that'll be noisy—I'll have him bayoneted. If you give me any more lip and hinder me in the execution of my duty, I'll have you tied up too.'

"‘Watch you mean, you ignorant soldier? I know the law. I'm an advocate, and you've made a mistake this time. I got a pass to live out here unmolested from the Commander-in-Chief, and I have passes from the Military Governor and the Military Commissioner of Police, and the District Police Officer. Isn't that enough for you? We'll see what the Commander-in-Chief will say to this.'

"‘Yes, yes, I know all about that, sir, and we'll have a look at those same passes in the morning, please; but are you going to tie up that dog?'

"‘No, I am not.'

"The Major gives Jim and me the nod, and tells us to settle the brute if there was any trouble. The dog was one of those large, long-haired, no-how mongrels; a

'pie' dog the Major called it later — I suppose because of its colour. He was rare savage, too, and as soon as Jim gets over the fence making kind noises and saying, 'Come here, Fido. Good dog, then!' the beast flies at him, and I had to push it with my bayonet. I was sorry; but he was a dangerous brute anyway. While I was wiping the blade on his fur an old josser with whiskers pops his face out of a window and carries on something shocking. He called us murderers and sand-baggers, said he would have us tried by court-martial and see us swing for it, an' I don't know what. I must say that, what with our climbing about and the scrapping an' Carlo's blood an' all, the place *was* a bit untidy." He stopped to knock the ash off his cigar, and again offended against the Company's bye-laws.

"Between while the Major and pretty Sydney were making a song of it to themselves on the *stoep*. The Major was getting a bit warm, and I was afraid every minute that he'd give the show away."

I was getting a little mixed. Who was Sydney? But the next sentence enlightened me. It was only a generic term, as had been Stripes, Tooty-Frooty, Carlo, and Fido.

“ ‘I tell you that martial law is not known to jury’s prudence, and I’ll have a writ of heavy as corpus against you, my man,’ says the lawyer.

“ ‘Don’t know anything about heavy as corpus, and I don’t give a dam for jury’s prudence, but if you don’t stop your infernal row and get inside and pull the blinds down, in one minute I’ll have both you and old Jack-in-the-box at the window over there triced up and gagged,’ shouts the Major. ‘An off—soldier of any other nationality would have shot the pair of you long ago.’

“ ‘We’ll see about that to-morrow. I’ll report the lot of you to Lieutenant Brassard in the morning; he’s my very good friend.’

“This made us cough a bit. To report the C.O. to one of his own lieutenants was

a little bit of all right, and brought the Major back to the situation. He speaks soft as rice pudding : ' Very good, sir. Don't be too hard on a man doing his dooty, sir ; but your minute is dam near up,' he says.

" ' I'll go, under protest ; but you're the ringleader, and I'll take your name now as a start off. What is it ? ' says the other.

" ' Snodgrass, sir,' says old Jackie, careless-like, without as much as a cough."

" *How* much ? " interposed the man in the other corner of the railway carriage.

" ' Snodgrass,' he says, just as pat as I'm a-saying it now—' Snodgrass.' That shows you the class of man he was. I told you he liked his bit of fun ; but fancy inventing a name like that on the nod ! "

Both men roared. I chuckled, though for a different reason. I started to speak, but stopped. Enough reputations had been shattered in South Africa : why wreck another at home ?

" ' Well, Private Snodgrass,' says me young lawyer, ' you'll regret this.' "

“ ‘ Yessir,’ says Jackie, very slick again.

“ With that the pair of them went into the house, and two of us were told off to watch it so that no one left to give information. The Major hadn’t done with me friend, neither.

“ Well, we lay out all night, and whether it was that the information was wrong or that the infernal noise had warned every one off the track, nothing happened, and it was a sleepless, hot-eyed, mosquito-bitten crowd that rolled up when the whistle for the assembly went somewheres before dawn. Two stayed behind the house and the rest of us fell in in front, looking for some fun.”

The narrator paused, and I was sorry to observe that the train had got near my destination and was slowing down. I wanted to hear the end of the story, yet I dared not hurry the teller. He went on—

“ The Major went up and kicked the door. Old Jack-in-the-box opened it quickly this time.

“ ‘Good morning, Sergeant Snodgrass. What do you want?’ he says, slim-like. I suppose he had time to chew over things.

“ ‘Send out that young feller in the ice-cream suiting what wouldn’t tie up his dog last night.’

“ ‘Oh, my son! He’s in bed, Sergeant—eh?’

“ ‘I’m not a sergeant. Fetch him quick.’

“ ‘He’s a good boy, but he was excited last night. He didn’t mean anything, sir. What are you going to do with him?’

“ ‘He’s got to come along o’ me.’

“ At this moment young Smarty himself come to the door and looks over Dadda’s shoulder.

“ ‘Oh, there you are, my friend!’ says the Major. ‘Just get on your clothes.’

“ ‘What for?’ says the feller, with a bit of a drop in his voice.

“ ‘To come up before the District Magistrate for obstructing me in the execution of my duty, and very likely for aiding and abetting His Majesty’s enemies.’

“ ‘I refuse to. I’ll have a writ of——’

“The Major pulls out his watch—it wasn’t going, by the way, ’cos a brick had damaged it the night before, he told me so himself—an’ says, very grave, ‘I’ll give you two minutes to put on some clothes. Then you’ll come in whatever you’re wearing, whether you’re suited or non-suited.’ Then he laughs nasty to himself as if it was a joke. But he kep’ it to himself, and I don’t know to this day why he laughed so much.

“In two minutes my Lord was on the *stoep* with a pair of *veld schoen* on his feet and a coat and trousers over his night-shift. Ole man Oom was near as a toucher weeping now.

“ ‘Oh, don’t shoot him, sir!’ he says.

“ ‘I don’t know : I’ll see,’ says the Major, very gruff. We marched off and took our prisoner and juggled him in the District Charge Office.”

The cigar was done. Mr Martin was stopping to fill his pipe. As I was just getting out there seemed no need for me

to sacrifice another of the Laranagas, which I had put in my cigar-case for a client by the way ; but loading a pipe from a little canvas sack full of dust is a ticklish operation, and the train was getting terribly close to the station. At last he went on—

“Next morning up he came before the Martial Law Magistrate.”

“What charge?” I interposed. Perhaps it was waste of time ; but though I had heard a good deal that was distinctly distasteful to me, I was really interested.

“I don’t rightly remember now,” he says ; “I never could understand charge-sheets very well. Let me see——” He began scratching his head. The train stopped.

“Never mind the charge,” I said hastily, as I collected my coat, gloves, bag, and book. “What happened?”

“The first witness called was Major John Bernard, and when he steps up into the box with his medal ribbons—he’d got quite a lot of medals—and belt on and the crowns twinkling on his shoulders—why——”

I had to get out of the carriage, but I waited by the door.

“Yes, yes!”

“The prisoner’s face was a fair picture—like the collector’s man’s at the last station. Before the Major had been sworn even, or opened his mouth, the prisoner, lawyer or no lawyer, blurted out: ‘Oh, oh, I beg your pardon.’”

“Yes, but what did he *get*?” I asked. The train had started, and I was far more interested to learn the terrible fate which awaited the transgressor against martial law than I was in his facial expression.

But I was doomed to disappointment, for amidst the banging of carriage doors and shouts of “Stand back” from the guard, all that I could hear was—

“The blighter ’adn’t forgot the name, you see, any more than me. ‘Major Snodgrass,’ he says quite pat——”

MY MATINÉE TEA
OR
THE COUNTER-OFFENSIVE

It may have been an exhibition of insular prejudice ; or it may have been the result of reactionary panic caused by the siege of Sidney Street, for it happened just after that. As a matter of fact, however, I had started the day badly. Johnny had left his duck in the tub overnight. The morning was dark ; the duck was dead white. Naturally, I did not see the thing under the water, and sat on it. Not only did the pieces cut me, but I had to promise the child a new bird. Much as I approve of my son's love of animals, even of china ones, I cannot help thinking that it was

extremely careless of the nurse to allow him to leave his toys about. I daresay this misadventure really had a good deal to do with the fact that the *matinée* bored me so much. It is not easy to respond to the inanities of a star comedian when one is suffering from recurrent twinges of pain. This was my first visit to the theatre after returning home, and I was annoyed to find that the play was an adaptation from a foreign work. I think that this gave a particular bias to my hitherto vague resentment against things in general.

It was quite dark, but not foggy, when we trooped out of the theatre, and the rain had stopped ; but the streets were shimmering seas in which motor vehicles of every kind skidded and hooted. As it was the Christmas holidays, every place of entertainment was disgorging its crowd on to the already thronged pavement—in fact, I was almost as much struck by the numbers of idle people who could afford the leisure to go to the play in the afternoon as I was

perturbed by the horde of foreigners in London. Round me raged Babel. Not knowing where to get china toys, I stood awhile on the edge of the pavement and pondered.

As I stood, I felt paralysed by the vast maelstrom of traffic in front of me, and my nerves were jarred by the orgy of noise. First a long, piratical motor, fitted with two blinding searchlights and carrying a stuffed black cat on its prow, slid by. As it passed, one of the crew sounded an instrument which emitted the "Last Post" in chords. Beyond, a second car moaned with the deep tone of a liner in a fog; while the siren of a third, which was hurtling through the slush in the opposite direction, wailed like a lost spirit. I was then startled by a gurgling grunt, repeated several times diminuendo. This brutal noise—suggestive of elemental things, of death and of slaughter-houses—made my blood run cold. Why did the authorities allow the cries of dying animals to be

reproduced in the streets of the capital? But it was not only the ear that was affronted. My nostrils were assailed by the pervading stench of petrol and burnt lubricant, while my eyes ached from the riot of illumination which smote them from every side. The discreet blackness of night was vanquished by the flaming cressets, desecrated by the flickering sky-signs, offences against taste, and marvels of perverted ingenuity, which intermittently shone out and were occulted on high. As a reeking motor-omnibus clanked by I saw a chance of crossing the street, and I stepped gingerly off the pavement. I was at once driven back by a triplet of shrill yaps at my elbow, as a pea-green taxi-cab ski-ed past sideways, missing me by inches. The braked wheels threw slush over me, while the pale, foreign-looking driver shouted something about people sleeping in the street. Before I could frame a suitable reply the abomination had yapped its offensive way into the centre of the traffic,

leaving me choking in a trail of blue smoke which clung to the slush. When I recovered from the shock I was in a thoroughly nasty state of body as well as of mind, and I spent a few moments in scraping slime from my face and clothes. No, I did not like London, nor its cosmopolitan population.

Finally managing to struggle across the street, I walked on and soon passed the portico of a restaurant which catered for the thousand. In the windows, among placards of "Theatre Dinners," "Theatre Suppers," I saw the announcement of a new meal, "Matinée Teas," and, as I was in need of refreshment, I turned into the place. At the very doorway I was almost thrust back into the street by the strong smell of food, the crash of music, and the crush of people. But I persisted in forcing an entrance and found myself in a large and over-ornate hall. Every table was packed, and the programmes in the hands of many showed that they too had just

come from the theatre. Harassed-looking aliens were rushing about with food, and above the clatter could be heard the wail of a string orchestra. As I wandered down the room looking for a seat, I was unfavourably impressed by the general deterioration in manners. Quite a number of people seated at the tables looked up and stared at me rudely.

On one side of the hall were some uniformed musicians. They were all pale or swarthy; and all except the leader had long hair. They looked tired, and I could not help sympathising with these really musical men, whom the struggle for existence compelled to live confined in a stuffy atmosphere of food, grinding out the same programme over and over again to unappreciative crowds. The conductor appeared the most bored. He was a heavily-built bald-headed man with fiercely upturned black moustache and pouchy eyes. As I was speculating whether he was an exiled potentate or a political refugee, our glances

met, and something in my appearance must have amused him, for he grinned and said a word or two to the performers near him. They stared hard and laughed whilst they continued to play—laughed offensively. I knew that their merriment was at my expense, and I experienced a revulsion of feeling. Not only did these dirty Anarchists and otherwise undesirable aliens swarm into the country and take the bread out of the mouths of honest, deserving Britons, but they insulted the people who showed them hospitality! I am, unluckily, a small man physically, and, strongly tempted as I was to an assault, felt that I might get the worst of an encounter with these savages. Being of a retiring nature, even victory in a knock-down and drag-out fight in a public restaurant did not appeal to me. Defeat was still less attractive. No, I could not afford to force my way to the orchestra and beat these scum of South-Eastern Europe over

the head. I must devise some other less crude form of revenge.

I fancied, as I stalked away, that some of the waiters, that usually obsequious and tip-hunting race, smiled. There they were, in rows, in pallid battalions, clever, attentive, yet with a covert insult in their servile expressions. What a contrast they formed to the heedless crowd they were serving! How many thousands of such subtle, industrious foreigners were there not in London alone—all waiting. Waiting for what? I loathed their flat, pale faces, their smooth hair, their complacent air of efficiency. Yes; they were grinning—offensively! These fellows—musicians, waiters, all—wanted a lesson!

Search as I would, I could discover no vacant seat, and was about to give up the hunt, when a frock-coated major-domo stepped forward and bowed.

“Vill you blease to go ubstairs? Zere is blenty of rhoom.”

Leading me up a gorgeous flight of stairs, he ushered me on to a broad gallery which ran down one side of the hall, and showed me to a table next, and end on, to the balustrade of the gallery. I observed that it bore the fatal number of thirteen! Of the six seats at the table, only four were occupied. On its farther side were a small boy and two ladies. On the near side, the two chairs closest to the edge of the gallery were empty except for some umbrellas, a muff, and a man's hat. In the third seat sat a man.

Before any words passed I took a dislike to this party. No one made any offer to move the things so that I could sit down, and I stood quietly looking at the man. He scowled, and the two women glared at me — offensively. The boy brandished a fag-end of dough-nut, and said "G'way!"

"Excuse me," I remarked to the man, "do these things belong to you?"

"What'ch you think?" was the surly reply.

"I should like them moved."

"D'you want to sit at this table?"

"Certainly."

"Yer don't want both chairs, I suppose?"

"If you take the things off this end one, it will do." I felt tempted to hit this person in the neck. But, as I have said, I do not like being mixed up personally in brawls. Besides, its owner could have given me three stone at least.

The gear was ungraciously moved off the end chair.

"Some people do shove in," said one of the ladies.

"Yes," replied the other; "they seem to want the 'ole 'all."

"Eughh!" grunted the man.

"G'way!" snuffled the youth.

In spite of this astonishingly encouraging reception I sat down, firmly drew off my gloves, and ordered tea and a buttered scone. Here, evidently, were more people who required a lesson!

I come of a stock which prides itself on paying its debts, on the staunchness of its friendships, and on the strength of its enmities. I had now at least two accounts to settle—one against the bandit from the Balkans down below, the other against the party of Yahoos at table number thirteen. If my machinations for revenge should succeed in including incidentally some of the cosmopolitan ministers to the pleasure and luxury of Modern Babylon, so much the better !

I first turned my attention to my immediate neighbours. The man on my side of the table was a thick fellow, with what, I believe, is called the “torso of a gladiator,” and looked all the bigger for his fur-lined overcoat with astrachan collar. He had a florid face and a heavy jowl, and his moustache was waxed and twisted so tight that his upper lip was pulled out of shape. In his tie was a large diamond ; on the fingers of his left hand were two

more ; I could not see how many there were on his right hand. But, for all his jewellery, the man inspired no confidence. His personality suggested a combination of butcher and bootmaker, modified by a touch of the dealer in things that are neither new nor fresh. Possibly he handled "ole clo," rabbit-skins, or fried fish in bulk. I have never, to my knowledge, met a purveyor of tripe, but I felt that this person would have been a perfect seller of that comestible ; his hands were made for it. Beyond scowling for a moment, he paid me no more attention, and was soon deep in a paper of a class which stamps its reader. In the centre of the three opposite seats was the spouse of the tripe merchant, and obviously the mother of the boy. Almost middle-aged, massive, with dark hair and bright colouring, she was of the breed that is addicted to furs, satin, and precious stones. Beyond stating that she wore a

hat of the variety described as a "Chase-me-Charlie," and had the skin of some furry animal wound round her neck, I am not capable of describing her dress. On her left was a lady friend. This person had similar rich tastes in apparel.

On mamma's right, along the balustrade, was her hopeful, a promising youth of some five summers. Hands, face, table, and plush cover on top of the balustrade proclaimed the fact that he had been feeding, and I was thankful for the three feet of smeared marble between us. Curly-haired and ruddy-cheeked, he was a fine child, only missing beauty through a certain over-lusciousness. He was clad in a black velvet doublet with silver buttons, a frilly linen collar, and a bow of Stuart tartan ribbon; from which presents I surmised that he might also be wearing a kilt. Almost gorged, he kept his mouth open and breathed with audible difficulty. These symptoms were not unknown to me, and I mentally christened him the

“Adenoid.” I know the brand of child well, spoiled, overfed. As I studied him, the little lamb put his tongue out.

The two persons, evidently bosom friends, were still sipping tea and were deep in intimate conversation. “Yes, *deear*, what I feel about this place is that you do get yer money’s worth, what with the mirrors, and marble, and the silk plush. I *do* like silk plush. D’you know, *deear*, that Doris got one of these new beaded plush mantles at Push and Feather’s sale for next to nothing? She ’ad to fight for it; but what *do* you think she picked it up for?” &c., &c.

Both used the word “deear” with that iteration which deprives a word of all meaning, and with the nauseating intonation suggestive of undesirable intimacy, if not complicity.

By the time I had completed my survey of my company, the waiter brought my food, and bleated drearily, “Pot of tea. Butter’ zgone.”

"Where has it gone?" said I, thinking for the moment that the idiot had dropped it.

"Butter' zgone," he bleated again. I got annoyed.

"So I see; quite gone. Don't talk about it; fetch some more."

"Zome more zgone?" The man was a perfect fool.

"No! More butter!"

After he had departed, bewildered and reproachful, to carry out my bidding, I noticed that there were traces of butter on the thing in front of me.

Other people were also finding trouble with English as now spoken in London. Just behind me I overheard the query—"Chelly, blom pouding, or draifel?"

And this was Merrie England! I sighed.

"G'way!" countered the Adenoid promptly. He then continued, "I want some more dam, ma."

There was no reply. The two friends had now reached the "She sez"—"Sez I" stage of confidence, which is the most

difficult to interrupt. But the child was no sensitive plant; he laid a sticky paw on the velvet-clad arm next him:—

“Ma! I want some more dam.”

“Give over, Leo! You’re not going to; you’ve ’ad enough. Give over——” The admonition died away in the recital which was resumed.

I thought he was going to cry. Not he! He put out his tongue at his mother, and then at me again. ’Pon my word, I admired the little devil’s spirit. The last thing I wished him to do was to weep, and so break up the party prematurely—before it had received its lesson; and I determined to humour him. With a furtive glance round, I protruded my tongue. He grinned. I smiled back. So far we were all square, and the child’s responsiveness gave me a sudden inspiration. I might make use of him as an instrument for my purpose! But how?

At this moment the band struck up a

rollicking air, and the vendor of tripe at last looked up from his paper.

I glanced at the programme. The piece was a selection of English airs; but, with the exception of this and a few other numbers, the entire list was composed of foreign music. This again aroused my militant patriotism, and I leaned over the balustrade to look at the band. There it was, just beneath us, so placed that the occupants of our table or of that on either side could easily have dropped things on to the performers. The shiny bald head of the conductor caught my eye. It was almost vertically below and between myself and Leo. Myself and—*Leo!* Leo—the instrument! Why should not little Leo drop something? That would be action, possibly productive of reaction, which might cause two birds to be killed with one stone.

Something—yes! But what?

I sat back in my chair, and, in order to keep the “instrument” mellow and in

tune, again protruded my tongue. Then, whilst seeking inspiration, I allowed my gaze to wander round the hall. A number of the customers were, of course, foreigners; but amongst the scores eating, drinking, and listening to the music were many obvious Britons. They were nearly all young-feller-me-lads, and were accompanied either by Gladstone bags, underneath which were strapped hockey-sticks, or by big hats, under which were the young things they were escorting.

As I looked round, between mouthfuls of "zgone," from one group to another, my attention was attracted to a charmingly pretty girl seated at a short distance from me. She was trying to eat neatly a large and sticky piece of confectionery, while the half-furled veil on the edge of her hat was striving to prevent the consummation of her desire. So far all had gone well, and she had introduced one end of the coveted object between her lips. Her pretty white teeth had actually closed on it, when down

came the veil with a run. The sudden strain was too much for the delicacy. It broke in two, and fell on to the table with a splash. As the brown shell crumpled up a viscid white fluid oozed out.

"Oh dear!" she laughed, spluttering.

"My word!" said the girl next her.
"That's done it!"

It had!

"I beckoned to Number Thirteen. He did not see. I nearly called "Waiter!" but stopped just in time. I might need this fellow as a friend. Patriot as I am, I happen to possess a smattering of foreign languages sufficient to prevent my making use of the word "Kellner." "Ober," I whispered confidentially, and the man was at my side in a moment.

"What's the brown thing that young lady's got on her plate?"

"Zauzage and mashed."

"No, no—over *there*." I pointed. The damsel was too busy wiping her sleeve to notice my lapse of manners.

“Ach! Chogolate églair.”

“Are they—er—nice?”

“Yes, vair goot—vhip gream inside, ausgezeichnet, speciality of ze haus.”

“Bring me a plateful. A dozen.” He looked mystified. “Don’t you understand? Twelve—zwölf éclairs.”

With a muttered exclamation the startled man vanished.

While he was gone I laid ground-bait by winking alluringly at Leo. When the waiter placed in front of me a dish of long pieces of pastry all sticky and brown on top, the child’s eyes assumed a more congested look than ever, and his snuffling became as painful to hear as that of an aged pug scenting a chop. Pointing to the dish, he said—

“Ma, I want some of *them*.”

His mother was now quite absorbed. To judge from chance words, she was discussing the unsavoury details of the latest murder, which was at the moment a universal topic, in spite of the well-meant

efforts of the daily Press to allay morbid curiosity by keeping reports on the subject down to several columns a day. Again did a sticky hand essay to attract a neglectful parent's attention. But, vexed at the interruption to the spicy narrative of horrors to which she was listening, mamma did not even turn her head.

"No, *deear*; you're not to *do* it. Sit down and give over."

It was my chance. Nodding hard at Leo, I cut an éclair in two, and surreptitiously pushed one half over towards him. He watched it with bulging eyes—seized it—began to eat. Meanwhile I toyed with one. The sickly thing was full of a glutinous mess, but I made much play of enjoyment, smiling the while at my victim. He soon disposed of his share—inside his mouth, outside his mouth, and on his hands. I shoved over the other half. Again did he try to do his duty; but the last inch disappeared slowly, and I could see that mummie's little lamb had now had

more than enough, and would not spoil the plan in my mind from any desire to eat the means whereby it was to be effected.

The conductor's bâton rattled. The next piece on the programme was a "Rhapsodie Hongroise." I have always thought that the average orchestra is rather weak in its rendering of rhapsodies. To interpret this class of music properly necessitates that the performers should be carried away, and Britons can rarely work up to the accumulative frenzy of the climax. Possibly the foreigners down below would do better than the stolid Anglo-Saxon, especially as some might be playing their own national music. In any case I would try to ensure that a frenzy would be reached this evening.

The band struck up, the music starting in that misleading, humdrum way which to the uninitiated gives no sign of the culmination. The time for me to intervene had almost come. Papa, mamma, and lady friend were all occupied; baby alone was

attentive. Looking over the rail to get my alignment, I quietly placed a couple of éclairs on the ground between two pillars at the edge of the gallery near my left foot. I then caught Leo's eye, assumed a leer of invitation, and wagged my head to the lilt of the music. I felt rather a beast, but it had to be done. The little fellow was evidently highly strung and musical, for as the "Hooded Death of Hindustan," hypnotised by the drone of the reed-pipe, sways in response to every motion of the snake-charmer, so did Leo, open-mouthed and snuffling to the rhythm, imitate my movements.

The music dragged slightly. The performers wanted inspiration—in other words, needed ginger. I had no ginger; but I had éclairs. I took one and, screened partly by a friendly flower-vase, leant over the balustrade, aimed carefully, and dropped my bomb. I had time before I drew back to see it burst on the bald head beneath. Passing the whole dish of éclairs to my young friend, I again nodded.

Children are curiously imitative; with a chuckle of delight, Leo grabbed one and hurled it over.

Though the drag in the rhapsody now became more marked, the music continued. I believe these musician fellows are trained to go on playing when anything unusual happens, in order to allay possible panics. Their discipline was to be tested highly.

I gently propelled overboard with my left foot the missiles already laid on the floor, seized my bill, and rose, giving my trusty ally one farewell leer. He now was deeply engrossed in the game, and, with the lack of moderation peculiar to youth, was heaving éclairs over as fast as he could grab them. I was sorry, but I had no control over him. I walked swiftly to the cashier's desk and paid my bill. "Number Thirteen" was, by chance, close at hand. Pressing a coin into his willing palm, I said—

"I think those people are throwing the food about."

We both looked towards table thirteen.

The orchestra had not quite stopped playing ; but the sounds that were wafted up from below were no longer remotely musical, and a subdued murmur also was rising from the body of the hall. "Number Thirteen" and I distinctly saw the child twice throw something over the rail. Then his father, looking up, observed his offspring reach for the last missile in the dish. There was a scream from both ladies and a shriek from the little one as the brutal parent leaned across the table and roughly seized in one of his huge paws the tiny hand which grasped the confectionery. Under this additional pressure the dainty must have burst, for from between the father's begemmed fingers exuded spurts of cream and chocolate—the indubitable and damning proof of guilt.

The orderly-minded Teuton was aghast. "Zoh!" he murmured. "Aber das ist fatal!"

"Ja," I replied ; "fatal!" Giving him a gentle push towards what was probably

going to be the centre of the coming cyclone, I added, "So 'was macht man nicht," and walked quietly downstairs.

Half-way down I was met by a rabid person in uniform carrying a violin-bow. He was taking the stairs three at a time, and looked as if he had been interrupted in the middle of a shampoo. A short head behind, running neck and neck, came two others, also in uniform, also demented. One had the stick of a bass drum in his hand; the other waved an oboe. They raced past me panting and muttering strange words in Czech, Magyar, or possibly Russian. Amongst the "also ran," close behind, were several waiters and the major-domo.

By the time I reached the door of the restaurant the uproar in the gallery had become really scandalous. However, it was not my business, and I strolled out into the shining streets feeling considerably better than I had all day. I had done something for my country.

Fortified with a large-size cigar, purchased at the nearest tobacconist's, I then returned to the scene of my labours, in order to discover, if possible, their result. The crowd seemed thicker than ever, and a procession, headed by a huge policeman, was forcing its way from the portico through the heaving mass.

I became one unit of the wave of humanity driven back towards the edge of the pavement. The leading constable forged through the crowd, shouting his slogan, "Pass along there! Pass along, please!" Behind him came two policemen, hustling along a big man in an overcoat from which fluttered strips of astrachan. He must have been a desperate character, for the guardians of the peace were none too gentle in their treatment of him. Indeed, some of the crowd were moved to cries of "Shime!" "Don't 'andle 'im so crool." Then followed three officers, each gently but firmly escorting a gesticu-

lating man clad in a plum-coloured bastard Hussar uniform, consisting of short coat, skin-tight breeches, and long boots with silly little tassels dangling from their tops. Though none of the prisoners wore hats it was impossible to distinguish their features, owing to their smeared condition. The first miscreant was bald, was bleeding from his ear, and was clutching the stump of a violin-bow, of which the remainder trailed along in the slush at the end of a twisted rope of horsehair. The other two had long dank hair clinging across their eyes; one carried the half of some wood wind instrument.

In the rear, unescorted, followed a lady carrying a small boy in Scotch attire. She was shrieking. He was shrieking. He was also excitedly waving in the air one dirty brown fist, while he tugged with the other hand at the skin of some animal clinging to the lady's neck. Behind her back hung a wisp of feathers. Strangely enough, though it was not raining, all the members of this

curious gang were dripping wet, and were smeared with glistening patches, specially evident upon the ruffians in fancy dress. It was a disgraceful exhibition of the seamy side of the life of a great city, and I drew back in disgust until the procession, with its numerous rag-tag and bobtail, had gone by.

The crowd was passing along according to order, and I succeeded in crossing the pavement and, after a struggle against the tide of humanity ebbing from the restaurant, in reaching one of the expanding gilt doors in its portico. Under its lee I clung on like a piece of seaweed to a sluice-gate. A large hall-porter was wiping his hands on a duster. He looked me up and down and scowled.

"What's up, porter?" said I, in an airy tone. "Case of pocket-picking?"

Eyeing my clothes, my boots, my hat, he paused mistrustful. I resented this inspection; it reminded me of what had taken place inside the building. Then my fat

belted cigar and its aroma came into play, and with a final polish of his hands he beamed.

"No, sir. I didn't see the parties till the scrap was nearly over, but I believe that the gent with the retriever collar to his overcoat threw muck at the 'Ungarian Horchestra, and three of 'em run up and give 'im wot for and a thick ear."

"Three to one?" I ejaculated. "Did they hurt him much?"

"I guess they got a bit of their own back; but 'e's a man wot can look after 'imself and don't lay down to it."

"You know him, then?"

"Not to *know* 'im, but I've orften seen 'im perform and passed the time of day with 'im. It's old Benjy Bilkheimer."

"Indeed!"

"Yes—you know—the acroback. Retired from the perfession now and keeps a tidy little pub—the Dressed Crab, full licence—down Spitalfields way. Teaches Jew-jitsu or somethink of that. 'E was one of the

nuts, and no error, in 'is time. The 'Injer-rubber 'Ercules, or the 'Uman Borgon-stricter,' they called 'im. But I expect you've seen 'im do a turn at one of the 'alls?"

And this was the man whose neck I had contemplated punching! Verily and indeed had I avoided the ill-luck of the fatal number. I whistled gently.

"Yes, that sounds as if he were a bit of a fighter, certainly; but it was heavy odds," I said.

"That's right; it was a bit of odds—but I do like a man as fights fair. There was no call for 'im to pour a pot of cocoa and a jug of custard over people. It's an 'ound's trick. Real dirty, I call it."

"Did he actually do that?"

"I can't say as I saw 'im, because I didn't get upstairs till the scrap was over, worse luck; but I 'andled a few of them on the way out, and I 'aven't got the stuff off my 'ands yet. Throwing drink about, even if it is temperance, is foul fighting, that's

what it is ; and I shouldn't 'ave thought it of a man of Benjy's class."

The porter ceased his account for a minute while he attended to his duties. "Keep back there, please. The restaurong is closed for the evening, sir. No admittance this way, miss. No, ma'am, there's been no fire nor murder in the 'all, only a slight accident to a bandsman. This way out."

I clung to the gate ; though the outgoing stream had thinned a little, I still had to hang on. Amongst those who slowly pressed past were a young man and a girl—both British. He was vainly trying to smooth out the corrugations in a top-hat. She was talking music.

"Yes, and those brutes quite spoiled that lovely Rhapsody in F. I do love it so. I think it's simply *sweet*."

"Yes, they did," growled the more material male, regarding his hat ruefully. "They transposed it into an impromptu in L."

"Why, you silly old silly," she giggled,

squeezing his arm, "you know there's no L in music."

"No, but for five minutes there was something very like it in that room," was the ungracious answer.

"Oh, Albert, you wicked boy!" More little giggles, more squeezes. "What would Antie say if she heard you?"

"That fellow's hat has been in it," I remarked to the doorkeeper.

"Yes; the 'atters will come off best out of this. It's their benefit to-night." He looked hard at me. "You've 'ad a bit of a tumble yourself, sir?"

"Oh, no," replied I, with a somewhat guilty conscience, rather taken aback. "Why do you think so?"

"Why, *your* 'at wouldn't come to no 'arm for a bit of brushing. No offence, sir, but just look in that mirror."

I looked. Not only was my face streaked, but my hat was thickly spattered with mud—the legacy of the green atrocity that had parked at me an hour earlier!

“Ah, that was a taxi splashed me.”

“Yes, narsty things, them taxis. I’ll give it a brush-up, if you’ll allow me, sir. I ’ave a brush round the corner.”

While the hat was being tended and I was trying to improve the condition of my face, I became thoughtful, not to say a little remorseful. It was not only that my hat was a new one. It’s state explained so much.

“That’s better, sir.” And a renovated topper was handed to me.

“Thanks. Did these—er—brawlers do much damage?”

He chuckled. “I never see such a mess as there was up above—not for years and years and donkeys’ ears! What with tables turned over, crockery smashed, food spilled! When the four of ’em ’ad clinched, it was nigh impossible to get them apart. The old Borgonstricter ’ad a strangle ’olt on one, and ’is legs tied in ’alf-’itches round the other two. It wasn’t till they give old Benjy two siphons of lemonade in the

ear-'ole that he broke away. The missus was right in it too. Pitched a long fairy-tale about a drunken furriner with a bruised face and a top-'at 'oo'd tried to poison the child. She let the bandsmen 'ave something on appro' on 'is account."

"Where is the—foreigner?" I still had sufficient spirit left to be annoyed at this description of myself.

"'E's done a guy—if there ever was one; but the woman was fair dotty, and I don't believe there never was none. A furriner poisoning 'er kid! Why, the little nipper was fit enough to do 'is bit for the old firm. 'E nearly chewed one of the conductor's ears orf. Poisoned? Not 'alf! I seen the man's ear."

Puzzled as I was by all these negatives, I dared not interrupt.

"When the lot was dragged apart 'alf-drowned, some fool must scratch 'imself against a switch. Turns off the lights in the gallery. Then, of course, some one else must sing out 'Fire!' That put the lid on

it! The women were screaming and fainting in 'eaps. I can tell you it was as near panic as 'kiss' your hand.' Case for an inquest it would 'ave been, if the boss 'imself 'adn't gone up and made the remains of the band play slow music. He's up there now with some of the cashiers, booking names and complaints. Restaurong is closed for this evening, sir," he concluded, in a louder tone, to a would-be customer.

"I'm so glad I wasn't there," said I. "What a hot-tempered lot these foreigners are! They're positively dangerous."

"Oh, the waiters weren't in this, except to try and separate the scrappers, and get kicked in the face and soused. It wasn't their funeral."

"No; I meant the musicians."

"Love you, sir, the bandsmen ain't furriners. They calls 'em the 'Puce 'Hungarian Horchestra'; but that's to please the class of customers we get. They come here to see life, and want something Continental and wicked-like. That's why we

gives 'em French me-nus, German beer, and everythink of that."

"The band not foreigners!" I gasped.

"I don't think. They're Bert 'Uggins' little lot from Peckham Rye way. Most of 'em used to play at our 'Armonic Club not so long ago. Bettered theirselves now."

"Was—is—Mr—Huggins—the conductor?"

"That's right—with the bald 'ead."

My pouch-eyed Balkan prince — Bert Huggins, of Peckham Rye! Incapable of speech, I made a feeble and involuntary gesture of disgust with my hand, and accidentally threw away my cigar.

"What's the time?" I asked, irrelevantly.

"Time, sir? Six-thirty, sir."

"Good night, porter. I must be getting home now," said I, doing the necessary.

"Yes; it's goin' to be a wet evenin'. Good night, and thank you, sir."

I went.

“METHODS OF BARBARISM”

THERE were stretches of sand and dry mud down in the river-bed, and here the horses were collected under cover. Although the mist had been almost dispersed by the sun, which had now been up for some little time, it still clung to the surface of the sluggish river and curled off it like steam, making the water look warm and almost inviting to the horse-holders shivering in the shade on the east side.

Quite a brisk action was going on somewhere on a level with 'the top of the thirty-foot banks, and the fighting was not far off. But its direction could not easily be located, for the sound of the firing was caught between the slopes and reverberated from one

to the other in such a way that each report merely prolonged the echo of the last, until the hollow river-bed was filled by a continuous din apparently proceeding from every quarter. Against this almost solid background of noise the coughing and champing of bits close by were hardly noticeable. The horses, however, were standing comparatively still. It was too cold and too early for the plague of flies that would swarm down here three hours later.

The Major commanding the squadron of dragoons engaged—also the commander of the expedition sent out to destroy Van Niekerk's farm, which had been such a nest of snipers—had just galloped along the sheltered river-bed from the firing line in front, now so busy covering the work of demolition.

“Mr Digby back yet?” he asked, without dismounting.

“No, sir,” said the corporal, who came forward. He looked round, then corrected himself—“Just coming now, sir.”

Down the bank, dodging between the bushes, ran a subaltern of the same regiment, in great haste.

"Well?" inquired the commander. He also was in a hurry, and did not wait till the youngster reached the bottom of the slope.

"Holt says that he'll have the whole place down in ten minutes, sir. He's fixing it up now."

"Good. I can give him ten minutes comfortably. Anything else before I go back?"

"While I was on that knoll up above, I saw something through the bushes on the top of the other bank which looked like another building. It must have been hidden by the scrub or the farm as we came along. If you don't want me for a few minutes I'll get across and find out what it is. You can't see it from here," he added as the Major looked upwards across the river.

"Sure?"

"Yes."

"All right. Isn't that a boat of sorts over there?"

"Yes: must be a ferry worked by this rope," replied Digby, pointing to a thinnish hawser which stretched from a rough hold-fast down into the water.

"Well, bring it across if you can; but don't waste any time. Report to me here. I shall be back by the time Holt's finished." The Major cantered off again with his orderly.

Within a minute the young dragoon was stripped naked. Before another thirty seconds had passed he had tied his magazine pistol on the top of his smasher hat with the pugaree. Inside two minutes he had waded carefully up-stream through the shallow water and was swimming a steady breast-stroke, head well up, amid the wisps of mist which seemed to enwreath him. The horse-holders, who had not heard the conversation, watched his progress with interest.

"Wonder what 'e's after?"

“Shouldn’t be surprised if there wasn’t some of these stinkin’ crocodiles in the river.”

There were only forty yards or so of deep water in the shrunken river, for it was December, but, sluggish though the current looked, it was strong enough to carry the swimmer some distance down stream, and it was several yards below the boat that he landed. As he crossed the flat sand on the far side he took off his hat, untied the pugaree, and whipped the pistol from the holster in which he had carried it for fear of any accidental touch on the trigger. Then, in the still slanting rays of the sun which flooded the west bank, his white body could be seen flashing in and out from behind the bushes as he climbed the slope.

“I hope there’s a bit of a path yonder, anyway,” said the corporal, who had quietly seized his rifle and made two men do the same, in case of necessity — a precaution which the young officer, for all his zeal, had

forgotten to arrange. “Them thorn bushes ’ll make a fair picture of ’m, else.”

The white body disappeared, completely swallowed up in the mass of scrub which hid the upper part of the bank, and for five minutes there was nothing on the sunlit sandy slope with its covering mantle of grey bushes to catch the eyes of the watchers. And no sound came from beyond it.

Then there was again movement amongst the topmost bushes, again a glint of white. The three men gripped their rifles. But there was no need to use them; and in two minutes the explorer was stepping out of the boat, which had grounded in the shallows. As he splashed ashore the Major returned.

“Well?” It was his formula.

“Small house fifty yards beyond edge of bank,” panted the dripping subaltern. “Ought to be destroyed if we’ve time, sir. It’s just in a line with the farm and our camp, and when the farm is blown up they’ll

be able to snipe us from it. There are four small rooms.”

“I’ll turn Holt on to it as soon as he’s done the farm. Hope he won’t have used up all his gun-cotton.”

Digby was a curious figure as he stood there with chattering teeth, making his report. His clothing consisted of a hat—the pistol and pugaree were in the boat—and some mud which came half-way up his shins and took the place of socks. And as he talked he unthinkingly wiped the black slime from the rope off his hands by rubbing them on his body and thighs. By the time he had finished he was striped like a ring-hals.

“Oh, there’s a decrepit old fossil of a Boer and a small boy in the house. They’ll have to be brought away.”

“Yes. Holt will do that. You’d better get on your kit.”

The Major dismounted and started to climb up the bank.

Meanwhile, not sixty yards away, up on the top, on this side, was the said Holt—subaltern in charge of the small party of Sappers employed in preparing to blow up Van Niekerk's farm. At the precise moment when Comrade Digby of the cavalry was climbing naked into the boat to return from the far side of the river, Holt was kneeling on the floor in a corner of one of the small front rooms of the farm. After straightening out something which looked like a three-foot length of shiny black sash-cord, and carefully turning up its end, he weighted it down with a brickbat. He then crawled across the floor over a miscellaneous litter of battered meat-tins, a sheepskin or two, bones, paper, and the empty brown cardboard cases in which Mauser ammunition is packed, to the doorless opening leading to the central chamber of the building. There were five rooms in the farm,—a large central room which ran from back to front, and four small ones opening off it, two on each side. That in which Holt was groping

about was in front on the north-east corner. As he stood up in the thickness of the wall in the doorway the reason of his squirming over the filth-covered floor suddenly became clear. There was a smack; and in the back wall of the room, just opposite the window opening, about breast-high, there appeared a fresh star in the coarse plaster, and on the floor underneath grew up a little heap of white powder. It was like a conjuring trick. Many such wounds disfigured the wall, and there were several little heaps on the floor, for the window directly faced the enemy who were shooting so merrily.

Holt had decided to place a gun-cotton charge in each of the five rooms of the building. They were to be fired as simultaneously as possible with the means at his disposal, and had therefore been fitted with equal lengths of safety fuse to allow one minute. He himself had laid one and had deputed the preparation of the others to four of his men. When all were ready, he

was to give the word, and each man would at once light up. To avoid accidents, so soon as his fuse was ignited each man was at once to sing out his name and leave the building. If the whistle sounded all were to bolt immediately.

From his coign of vantage in the thickness of the doorway Holt could watch three of his men; but he could not see him who was working in the back room behind his own, and it was there that he had placed his sergeant. Time was getting on. He raised his voice to make sure of being heard above the noise and shouted “All ready?”

“No, sir!” roared out the sapper in the front room facing Holt as he stood. He was nervous, and had fumbled.

“All right, Bastow, take it easy,” said Holt. He knew Bastow’s disposition. Besides, it was ticklish work for a young soldier who was doing the real thing for the first time, especially as the bullets were every moment starring the wall not

six feet from his head. The worst thing that could be done was to hustle, and yet there was need for haste. Holt consulted his wrist watch. Then, while he waited, he idly swept some of the mess on the floor to one side with his foot. The place was horrible to look at. Besides the rubbish and offal which lay all round—the legacy of the burghers who had used the house as a convenient outpost—there was nothing. All the furniture had been removed or burnt, and the doorways were innocent of doors and the window-openings of frames. When he had given Bastow another half minute Holt again spoke. “All ready now?”

This time there was no dissent.

“Prepare to light.”

“Light.”

Holt gripped his whistle between his teeth and ran crouching back to his own corner. He knelt down, pulled a match-box from his pocket, and listened. Before he fired his own charge, in order to give

the men a start, he intended to wait until the first of them signalled that he had lighted up.

After a very few seconds a shout rang through the house—“Stewart; burning.” This was the sergeant. Holt at once looked at his watch. The minute would count from now. He then struck a fusee, and seizing the end of the fuse in his left hand, held it firm while he deliberately pressed the glowing head against it. The thing spat out a small jet of sparks and a spurt of thin blue smoke, and Holt laid it down tenderly, then crawled back to the doorway to wait for the others.

As he stood he could hear in the corner behind him a hissing like that of an angry snake. It was not a pleasant noise, for there was such a thing as faulty or perished fuse, and the slowly travelling fire might go out altogether or, what was more exciting, might flash straight down to the detonator. And it was with impatience that Holt watched the now jumpy Bastow,

who could do nothing right. First he made several efforts to strike his fusee on the side of its head instead of on the bright red tip, as he had been trained. Then he rubbed it so savagely that it broke.

There was a second cry, “Stephens; burning,” and the sapper at the back of the central room crawled out. Time was slipping by, and Holt itched to dart across and take over the bungler’s job; but he could not, for there was still one other man left in the room behind him, and he dared not speak.

The luckless Barstow had now actually succeeded in striking a “Vesuvian,” but he had grown more and more flurried, and was now trying to dab it on to the fuse without holding the latter steady. Of course it dodged about and eluded his rather shaky hand. But, nervous as he was, he was full of grit, and if left alone would probably have gone on trying till he was killed by the detonation of the other charges.

By now thirty seconds had passed, and Holt seriously feared that he would have to blow his whistle. The suspense was so great that he could not stand still, and was executing a noiseless step-dance in his corner.

"Hayes; burning," echoed through the farm, and a third figure stole out.

Holt lost no time. Still crouching, he pounced on to the sweating Bastow, seized him by the shoulder, and hissed "Clear out." "*Crawl!*" he roared, as the man stood up to full height and began to run, oblivious of bullets.

He then made one effort to fire the thing himself. He failed to do so, and saw that the end of the fuse had been rubbed in the dirt or squeezed. There was no time for re-cutting. He dropped the thing, squirmed from the room, past the smoking charge at the back of the central chamber, and slunk out of the house.

And it was none too soon, for as he

raced across the open towards the river-bank whither his detachment had preceded him the first charge went off. He felt the air quiver at the back of his neck, and sundry stones whizzed past him.

“One,” he muttered, staggering on.

As he dived over the brow of the bank he almost fell on to the Major, who was laboriously climbing upwards.

“Well? I was wondering how much longer you were going to be. Six men have been hit, and several horses. They’re collecting like hornets now. Shall have to move very soon.”

The subaltern was listening too intently for further signs of his handiwork to pay due attention to what his senior said, and he made no reply. There was a second loud detonation, and a blast of small stones swept through the scrub up above.

“Two,” he counted.

“That’s all right, then,” said the commander, and proceeded to clamber up over the edge.

"Hold on!" shrieked Holt, grasping him unceremoniously. "There are two more." At that moment there was a third report, and a heavy body snarled past overhead, smashing its way through the bushes, and fell into the water with a splash.

"Three," he remarked solemnly, holding up his hand to enjoin silence, as if the sound of the explosions might otherwise escape notice. There was now a longer interval; and the eyes of the two officers and those of the orderly close by were fixed in that steady, vague, unseeing stare which shows that hearing is the sense upon which attention is concentrated. As the suspense was prolonged Holt cocked his head on one side like a listening parrot, and his expression grew anxious.

Another detonation rang out.

"Four," he gasped in a tone of relief. "That's right now, sir. May have to pick a bit of wall down, but that won't take long."

"Look here, Holt, I'm afraid there's

another house to be demolished. Have you any stuff left?”

“Not much—about eight slabs, I should say. I didn’t know there was to be anything else, and I’ve been a bit lavish.”

“I know. It’s not your fault in any way. Point is—can you do anything with your slabs?”

“What sort of a house? Can I have a look at it?”

“’Fraid not. No time. It’s out of sight, on the other side. Digby’s been over and found a small four-roomed house fifty yards from the river, sort of beiwohner’s shanty. Well—what is it?” he added to a breathless orderly who had just climbed up towards him, leading his horse.

“From Captain Wheeler, sir.”

The Major tore open a note.

“All right. Wait a minute.”

He turned back to Holt.

“Wheeler says he can’t stick it more than seven or eight minutes. They’re getting round to our left a bit, across the

river. I'll give you eight minutes before we fall back. Just nip over with what stuff you have, and do your best with the shanty. We shall retire the same way we came. Remember that they're over on that side now — probably some way off, though. Don't get scuppered.”

Sending one of his men to collect the unexpended material and take it down to the river to await his arrival, Holt led the others up to the pile of *débris* and cloud of dust which now represented the farm, and set them to work with pick and crowbar to level the one corner of the house which was still standing and the stone walls of a kraal. He then ran down to the river and found the sapper bailing water out of a very crazy boat. On the seat in the stern was the gun-cotton, detonator, and a short piece of fuse. As he tumbled into the boat and shoved off, Holt noticed the scanty length of the latter.

“Good Lord, Stimson! That all the safety?”

“All that’s left, sir.”

Quite gravely the subaltern whistled the eight notes usually associated with that vulgar refrain, “Goin’ to the ball this evenin’?” And inappropriate as this sentiment may appear to the ultra-refined, to the less cultured soldier present it expressed the situation to a nicety. Seizing the hauling-rope, he whistled the reply under his breath. As the water-logged boat nosed its sodden way across the river it became quite evident that the enemy had got to the left more than a bit, for several bullets hummed overhead, and one or two dived into the stream with a “phuit.” But there was serious work toward; and, feet in six inches of bilge, Holt was kept fully employed connecting up his charge. When he jumped ashore he was carrying the gun-cotton ready primed and lashed together in one hand, and in the other a poisonous-looking red detonator with the length of fuse dangling from it.

“You wait here till I come back,” he

said to Stimson. “If I don’t appear by the time the thing poops off, give me one minute and then get back to the detachment. See?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Better get behind that hump—there are a good many stray bullets flying about now. Hold on. Just pat my pockets first. Feel a matchbox?”

“No, sir.”

“Thought so. Must have left it in the farm. Got yours?”

Stimson produced his own box of fusees.

“How many in it?”

“Six, sir.”

“Right. Don’t finger them with your wet hands, man! Put ’em in my pocket.”

Holt then ran up the diagonal path, and Sapper Stimson, rifle by his side, curled down in a depression in the bank, and after wiping the slime off his hands proceeded to try and entice a splinter from his thumb with his teeth. He had not even got a grip on the intruder when he was inter-

rupted by a whistle from the far bank, and an excited man in shirt and khaki breeches shouted out to him to bring the boat over. Now Stimson was not Bastow. He was a stolid man. He had got categorical orders and was not going to disobey them, and he said so distinctly and loudly. And he was not going to leave the boat to run up the bank and give Holt a message either. Even when his interlocutor explained with some emphasis that he was Lieutenant Digby of the —th Dragoons, though bound to accept the statement, he remained obdurate. As he muttered to himself, “He was not going to leave his own officer in the soup, not for the whole blooming cavalry division.” Without more ado the stranger stripped off the few garments he was wearing, and for the second time breasted the flood.

Somewhat surprised, and not quite knowing what was to happen, but feeling that he would be “on the mat” whatever he did, Sapper Stimson continued philosophically to chase the offending splinter. Succeed-

ing in extracting it, he spat viciously, muttered “Ikona! Not much,” and awaited developments.

Meanwhile, after some delay caused by the necessity for retying a gun-cotton slab which had slipped and fallen, Holt had reached the house. As reported, it was small, and about fifty yards from the river-bank. He approached it from the rear, which was the sheltered side, and found the back door open. This led on to a passage which ran straight through the house to the front door, which was shut. On each side of the passage were two doors. On the right, between the pair of doors on that side, stood a harmonium, and on top of it was a bookcase. Rushing in, Holt laid down his charge on top of the harmonium and peeped into the two back rooms. They were empty and almost bare, and he shut the doors. The central passage was evidently the place—the musical instrument might have been put there especially to suit his fell design

—and he wasted no more time in searching. Drawing the harmonium about eight inches away from the wall, he placed his gun-cotton in the intervening space and pushed the harmonium back tight up against it. He then packed the charge on top and behind with some books—in his hurry unconsciously using the heavy leather-bound Family Bible,—slipped the detonator into the primer, lit the fuse, and, carefully shutting the back door behind him, ran as hard as he could.

Half-way down the slope he collided with a dripping wet, naked man who was limping and stumbling upwards.

“Hullo, Digby! What the——?”

“Lul—lighted the charge?” gasped the newcomer.

“Yes, fizzin’ now. Come on back. No time to lose.”

“But where’s the old buster?”

“What old buster?”

“Why, the old Dud—Dutchman—and the kid in the house?”

“Good God! In that house?”

“Yes, yes!” screamed Digby, and began to run on.

“Stop!” said Holt. “I’ll go.”

“No; I’ll——”

“You won’t. You fool! I know where the charge is placed and how much time there is.” With that, Holt, who was far the heavier, gave the dragoon a hand-off, which sent him sprawling, and turned to run. Digby rolled for a few feet, his wet body picking up sand as he went, and was then caught in a thorn bush. Sapper Stimson watching from below chuckled, for though the naked man had not exactly popped over to have a chat, he had spoken a few kind words to the sapper as he hobbled over the sharp stones at the foot of the bank. By this time Holt was disappearing back over the edge; and the defeated one did his best to help.

“Right front room!” he yelled.

Holt put up his hand. As he ran on he at first wondered why the Major had

not told him about this. He then blessed the bad knot which had caused a slab to fall and so delayed his last journey from the river. But these points did not long claim his attention. His thoughts turned to the miserable little piece of shiny black cord he had last seen spitting fire on to the varnished surface of a walnut-wood harmonium-case. And he could not help making a lightning but futile calculation, based on the distance between the house and the spot where he had turned back, and the time in which he had once won the “Under Fifteen” hundred yards. The infernal thing was burning all right: he could see the thread of smoke trickling up the door-frame.

Throwing open the back door, he rushed straight down the passage to the front door, opened that, and burst into the room on the right.

In the centre of the room was a table upon which stood some crockery and the remains of a meal, and on the far side of

the table, facing the stove, was an arm-chair. Above the back of the chair trembled and nodded a grey slouch hat with a rusty crape-band round the crown. A small boy of about six was sitting on the floor close to the door. He was playing with a regulation mess-tin, and on his head was a British soldier's helmet.

“Jij moet nie bang wees nie,”¹ shouted Holt as he seized the surprised child, who, startled at being whisked off the ground by some unseen force, and not at all reassured by its efforts to speak the *Taal*, at once let out a yell of terror. Heaving the table into the corner of the room with his thigh, Holt darted across to the chair and dumped the child on the top of an old man seated in it. Then, with the caution “Hou vas!”² he steadied the two occupants with one arm, tipped the chair slightly back, and dragged the yelling, creaking mass across the floor, out of the room, over the lintel of the front door and

¹ You must not be afraid.

² Hold tight!

down on to the ground outside. The child shrieked all the more at sight of his captor, and severely belaboured the old man, who was too astonished or winded to do more than gurgle.

The breathless Holt continued his retrograde movement across the apology for a garden. About thirty yards from the house the remains of a wire fence lying on the ground acted as a trip, and, rather luckily for the three, suddenly cut short their wild career. Holt tumbled backwards, the chair over his legs, the old man on his chest and the child across his face.

At that instant there was a concussion which jarred the interior economy of the three lying so close. Unfortunately for science the sapper subaltern was prevented by circumstances from studying the effect of his work from a nearer point of view than any he had ever occupied before. First the flat roof of the house rose gently a couple of feet into the air; then the walls quivered and dissolved into their

components; lastly, the roof sat down squarely upon the ruins with a flop, propelling outwards in every direction a mighty puff of dust, as does a lexicon dropped on to an unswept floor. Its fall revealed a secret, for there arose an appalling cackle, and amidst the *débris* which rained down from the cloud of white dust and grey smoke descended a shower of fowls. Some sailed down, wings flapping, and ran hither and thither with hideous clamour; others fell with a heavy thud, inert and limp.

The shock of the explosion silenced the boy's cries for the moment. But, freed from his weight and Holt's constricting clutch, the rattled old man was galvanised into what might have been either a fit of coughing or a stream of guttural exclamations of surprise and terror. Both had rolled clear of their deliverer. Nevertheless, Holt still lay prone, half-stunned and thoroughly winded. When he raised himself on his elbows, dazed, and cough-

ing in the choking air, he saw sitting up, facing him, a strange, hairy old man and a boy. The air was thick with feathers; near by lay two dead birds; whilst others still full of life were racing round in a circle, hypnotised. As he gazed, a belated fowl's leg—which had evidently made a long journey—hit him on the cheek, and an angry cock crowed at him.

The anti-climax was too sudden. He began to chuckle feebly. And when, limping up through the murk, there appeared a naked, dust-smeared man, who stooped down every few strides to collect a dead bird, he rocked with laughter in spite of his bruised and aching body. It was not until Digby had picked him up, shaken him, and used much strong language, that he began faintly to appreciate the situation. He then seized the boy by the hand, and between them the two officers half-supported, half-forced the old Boer towards the bank, their progress in the direction of shelter hastened by the fre-

quency of certain humming noises in the air.

It was not very long before the worthy Stimson was hauling the boat back across the river. He was greatly relieved by Holt's safe return, but still somewhat sore at the verbal castigation he had received from the naked and dirty robber of hen-roosts now sitting by a heap of poultry in the bows.

Amongst the birds was the child, who had recovered from shock sufficiently to recommence howling. Aft, sitting next Holt, was the old Boer, now querulous. Holt sat silent, thoughtful, and puzzled, his aching head between his hands. For him the last twenty minutes had been somewhat crowded with incident, and he was still trying to collect his wits, scattered by the fall. From the bows the shivering dragoon regarded the pair of human beings who had just been saved, one near the end of his life, the other at the threshold. And he mused on the strangeness of the

chance which had led him to discover from a casual remark of the Major's that Holt had not been informed of their presence in the house. He was deeply grateful. He was not ungrateful also that the old Boer had been so cunning as to keep his poultry on the roof.

“Wat het jij met mij huisraad en mij Seraphein gemaak?” bleated the latter for the fifth or sixth time.

The reiteration of this sentence changed Digby's feeling of thankfulness to one of annoyance.

“W-what's the old fool making such a song and dance about now?” he asked. “He feeds me. I wish he'd shut up grow-ing.” As he spoke he crossed one bleeding foot over his knee and tried to pick out some of the sharp-pointed pieces of grit sticking into the sole.

Holt looked up and listened to the next repetition of the sentence.

“Oh, he's mad — talking out of the back of his neck. Wants to know what

we've done with some furniture and a harmonium!”

“Schelms!” wheezed the old fellow.

“Ja. Schelms!” echoed a shrill voice. “Wat het jij met mij Seraphein gemaak?” and as the small speaker hit the nearest of his brutal preservers in the face with the blood-stained carcass of a pullet, he added, “Verdomde Karki!”

By now the sounds of battle had grown more distinct; and while this chip of the old block fought for his grandfather's household gods with a dead fowl, the unseen messengers of his compatriots sighed and wailed overhead.

FULL BACK.

I.

It is the event of the football year—the match for which both schools have striven during the season. The Whites are two points ahead, but there are only five minutes to play, and it is still anybody's game. Amidst intense excitement play has been slowly forced into the Reds' twenty-five, and each scrum now starts closer to their line and more in front of their goal. But their defence is good. Time after time does the ball appear from the forest of legs and get slung out by the White scrum half, and time after time is the dangerous attack thus initiated

smothered by the fierce tackling of the defenders, or spoiled by a hasty pass or a fumbled ball. The tired players of both sides, inspired by the frenzied encouragement of their supporters, are making the utmost efforts, the Whites to ensure the match by increasing their lead, their opponents to score once again and so reverse the position. And there is time yet. The ball is slippery, and one intercepted pass may give Red the match.

The growing darkness, added to the autumn mist which always hangs over the clay soil of the football ground, increases the anxiety of the White full back now peering at the game from the near end of the field. At this distance he can only divine what is happening by intuition, for he can barely see the dark and greasy ball as it flies from hand to hand, and is only able to guess at its course outside the steaming scrum from the movements and attitudes of its players. He is a slim youth, and as he stands there in the drizzle, arms

akimbo, tapping the muddy ground with one foot, he presents a lonely figure. At intervals he prowls backwards and forwards slowly, watchfully, now blowing on his hands, now putting them into his pockets, now swinging his arms across his chest, at times performing a solemn shuffle in the sticky mud.

It is raining, and cold with that raw chill which penetrates to the bones of all who are not taking active exercise, and the back has had little to do for some twenty minutes; in fact, since he failed to save that try, when the big oaf of a wing three-quarter sent him sprawling by a hand-off, the muddy impress of which still stings on his face. The memory of his failure also rankles, though it was caused by bad luck. A slip in the mud, and he had tackled a thought too high to stop a faster, heavier man in his stride. Of no special physique, and possessed neither with great speed nor with phenomenal powers of kicking, he owes his position in the team to two

qualities — pluck and coolness. He is a safe tackle.

Though by now there is hardly any colour distinguishable amongst the players, except brown of various shades, their arrangement can be seen to keep on swiftly changing like the patterns in a kaleidoscope; and as a fresh outburst of roars sounds from the far end of the ground, where the crowd is thickest, the centre of action shifts over to the Whites' left. To judge from the shouts, they must be very near the Reds' line.

The Whites' back stands still, tense, on his guard, for at these moments of quick movement anything may happen. He also glances at the clock over the pavilion.

The high-pitched shouting is taken up closer down the ropes, and there is a sudden change in its tone. The back crouches expectant, waiting for a long relieving kick from the Reds, which, however, does not come. Instead, the whole game seems to approach, the players to loom larger. Then

out from the ruck bursts a Red with the ball. A White three-quarter dives at him and is floored. A second White player meets the same fate, and the runner staggers on amidst a fresh outburst of confused yells. On, on he comes down the field, gathering speed with every stride. Behind him stream a few of both sides : in front, between him and his opponents' goal-line, there is one player only.

The last hope of the Whites begins to sidle cautiously to his left with a crab-like motion. As he moves he rubs his hands down his short knickers, and every few steps clicks his heels together to shake the mud from his boots, for he does not mean to slip this time. His face is set and his mind is working quickly. He knows that if he does not tackle the man with the ball, and tackle him thoroughly, the game is lost. He is too absorbed to be rendered nervous by the fact that he shares the attention of the whole field ; but he notices subconsciously that the shouting has almost

died away. By now even the bulk of the two teams are standing still, watching, for they can do nothing; the fate of the game is out of their hands.

As he watches the runner who floored him with such ignominy the last time they met he smiles slightly, partly from the lust of personal combat, partly because he knows that this somewhat lumpish player can only run straight and trusts to his speed and brute strength to get through. Thank Heaven, it is not their long-haired centre who, ball held out in front, as if to pass, and head wagging, snipes irresponsibly down the field in a succession of feints and wriggles which leave his paralysed opponents standing, or more often sitting, in the mud; nor one of those tricky performers who at the last moment either kick over the opposing back's head and race for the ball or pretend to kick and run on. No; it is to be a straightforward thing this time.

Full back carefully regulates his pace and

moves in a nicely-adjusted curve so that his path will intersect that of the advancing runner just upon the touch-line. He will nurse the fellow right down the line and throw him into touch. Then, before the ball can be again in play, the whistle will have sounded. He is careful not to get too much in front of his opponent, for that may drive him inwards, and then, even if he is brought down, he may be able to transfer the ball into the willing hands of one of the Reds following up.

Except for the tramping of the feet of the spectators running behind the ropes up to the critical spot, there is now a hush over the field. On races the three-quarter, ball under arm—in the old style—head up and mouth open, with a somewhat stupid expression on his face, like that of a startled moose. He observes the calculated approach of his adversary, and, knowing his own limitations, appreciates his danger. Nevertheless, he is all the time edging more and more towards the boundary, as

the other desires. Even travelling at his top speed, as he is, he will not be able to get round the back, and cannot swerve or turn at that pace. With an anxious expression he glances over his shoulder, to see if any backer-up is close enough for him to pass. This checks him.

It is full back's chance. Quickening his stride, he launches himself in a running dive at the knees of the big fellow. With a thud the two locked players shoot over the line and slide for yards on the sodden turf, scoring it with a dozen parallel grooves. The ball is hurled far beyond the ropes.

There is no need for the flag of the touch-judge. Above the frantic cheers of the Whites shrills out the long blast of the whistle for "No side." The match is won.

II.

Time has passed. The scene is again laid in a field. But the game being carried on is more serious than football, and there are no crowds of cheering spectators.

Down one side of the flat meadow runs a country road between a double row of poplars. The three other sides are bare of trees, and the hedge and fencing along them have been knocked down and lie on the ground. Alongside the road is a line of large marquees of a special and curious shape, pitched broadside to the field. They do not look old, but they are extraordinarily dirty and creased, and have the appearance of having travelled much and of having been packed up and pitched again and again. At one end of them, in the usual regular lines, is a camp of living tents, and beyond this, in orderly disorder, stands a medley of vehicles of all shapes and sizes. Here are motor lorries, cars, and bicycles,

and several uncouth trollies long enough to carry stage scenery; on one of the lorries hums a dynamo. In the background lurk two draggled motor-omnibuses, with no glass in their windows, and their original garish colouring showing in patches through a hastily-applied coat of drab paint. In front of the marquees, more or less dismantled, and in every stage of the process of being repaired or "tuned up," sprawl some six or seven aeroplanes, the monoplanes looking like monstrous, winged minnows. They are set in the midst of a litter composed of planks, tarpaulins, strips of fabric, cans of "dope" and of varnish, drums of paint, kegs of nuts, coils of wire, members of framework, shining new propellers, parts of engines, and all the thousand-and-one articles which go to make up the equipment and *debris* of a military aviation depot in full operation. This portion of the field is a scene of feverish activity. Men are busy everywhere, some clustered round the aeroplanes, others

working at the benches fitted with electrically-driven tools spaced between them. The aeroplanes themselves seem to be chafing at their confinement and enforced idleness, and every now and again one apparently tries to burst away. After a sharp struggle men fall back hastily from the head of a monster, whilst others hold it down by wings and tail. The creature snorts, gives a hoarse roar, and trembles; its propeller melts into a shimmering blur; and a jet of blue smoke and steam is ejected backwards, flattening the quivering grass for yards. But all these exhibitions of temper are in vain. The giants are in every case too well secured to escape, and after much fuss are again reduced to quiescence. That the torture of the captives does not cease even at night is shown by the number of lamps fitted with large metal reflectors, which are slung from rough posts all round the benches.

In three of the corners of the field, also, like baby howitzers at extreme elevation,

the projectors of small searchlights gaze skywards, and in the fourth stands a tapering steel mast in the centre of a wire spider's web of some hundred yards diameter. It is the "aerial" of the field station of the wireless. Pegged out on the grass in the centre in yard-broad strips of freshly-whitewashed canvas is a large equilateral triangle. This cabalistic sign is intended to convey to those in the air the same information as the flag now hanging limp from its staff over the end marquee is meant to convey to those on earth: that here is the aeroplane park attached to general headquarters of the defending army, and the landing-place for airmen.

From north-east to north-west comes the distant noise of battle, and the palpitating air quivers every now and again to the concussion of big guns firing in the distance. But no one in the field is disturbed by the sound, and the work goes on without interruption.

At the open flap of one of the living

tents stands a young officer. Except for the helmet and goggles, which he is carrying in his hand, he is fully dressed for flight, and as he stands, arms akimbo, listening to some one in the tent, he taps the ground thoughtfully with one foot. He is the "observing officer next for duty," or, in ordinary language, the officer whose turn it is to make a reconnaissance flight. Lying on his bed inside the tent is the airman who has just returned from a long reconnaissance. He has made a successful trip, and has reported to the Commander-in-Chief, and should be resting. But it is a special occasion. He is elated almost to the extent of garrulity, for he has ascertained that the invading enemy is still ignorant of the great move to the southwest which the defending commander has attempted to carry out during an inexplicable cessation of the invaders' air-service.

"It really is touch and go. If they don't spot this flank move of our Sixth and Seventh Corps before dark, they're

done! And they've only got half an hour to do it in. The artillery of the Third Corps has just been ordered to follow up all night and co-operate in the morning, so that, in any case, surprise or no surprise, the attack will be an awkward one to stop. I wonder what can have happened? Not one of their machines in the air since yesterday afternoon. Can't make it out, unless they've had a fire in their main park, or some kind friend of ours has sought death by running amok amongst their machines with a sledge-hammer!"

Since every one else has been wondering the same thing for the past twenty-four hours this talk is neither interesting nor profitable, and the man outside the tent shows signs of moving on. The speaker then comes to the point:—

"I was able to examine all their dispositions at my ease, just as if it had been an inspection, and saw practically everything, in spite of all their wood-haunting, hedge-sneaking, canvas-screening

dodges. If I was puzzled by anything looked at from one side, I just went back and looked at it from the other side—from every side. The brutes haven't the vaguest idea of what's coming to 'em." The speaker likes this expression, and pauses to chuckle over it. He continues: "Never saw the Chief in such a state. He couldn't hide it. His feelings were a bit mixed, though. Quite pleased that his great *coup* was successful so far, but wondering if our run of luck would last out till dark. Like a man swimming with a shark after him—cheered after each stroke to find that he is still able to kick, but worrying how long his legs will be hanging to his body. Kept looking at his watch, then the sky, then the clock."

There is another short pause before the speaker runs on: "Not that I wonder. Not a bit. If they *do* find out before dark, not only will they be able to upset our game, but they'll know where our general reserve has gone, and will press their attack

on our right. Then we shall be in Queer Street! There's the deuce of a fight going on there now."

The other speaks for the first time, thoughtfully, monosyllabically, as if to himself: "They—must—not—find—out."

"Yes, that's all very well; but—by the way, are you taking up Number Twenty-seven again?"

"Yes."

"You know that the beastly gun won't work—at least, it wouldn't when I came back—nor the wireless,—I found one of the generator brushes gone, and we've no spares left."

"Yes, I know."

"None of the other 'planes ready yet?"

"No."

"Awkward if they do manage to scratch up some machine at the last moment, and it blunders on to our secret! Going alone?"

To this remark and question the next-for-duty makes no answer. There is the

glow of exaltation on his face, and his eyes are directed towards a wooded hill not far off, now all lit up in the slanting rays of the sun, which has peeped out for a minute. But he is not thinking of the beautiful colour effect produced by golden light on tender green foliage. A call from the telephone orderly breaks his reverie.

"There are my orders. Good-bye." He nods casually and walks off, taking a notebook from his pocket.

"Good-bye. Good luck," comes back, in a serious tone, from the tent.

He reaches the telephone. "Halloa—observer-next-for-duty here, sir.—Yes, I'll book it." The speaker then listens and jots down notes alternately. Finally he says: "Yes, I'll repeat. 'Fifth Divisional Artillery at east edge of Square J 16 reports large biplane, carrying two, passed at 5.37 P.M., flying fast south-westerly course.'——Yes, the direction is probably mere chance.——What's that? You'll arrange for interference from our wireless stations?——"

Oh no, it won't worry us; our wave is three hundred metres longer than their longest, and we shall be clear enough on loose coupling. But, anyhow, Twenty-seven's transmitting gear is out of order for this run. *Must be stopped at all costs!* I understand. Good-bye."

There is a more sincere note than is usual in this conventional telephonic farewell, and the speaker twice misses the hook as he essays to hang up the receiver. For the moment he seems still to be cogitating some knotty point. However, it is soon settled, and it is with a quick, firm step that he moves off towards monoplane Number Twenty-seven, lying apart from the other machines, facing the open field. It is "The Last of the Mohicans," the only aeroplane at present capable of flight, but a swift one. On the way he is met by the officer in charge of the refitting, a subaltern who has one arm in a sling and a shade over one eye—the one wounded officer or man in the Air Corps, the duties of which

are not responsible for many wounded. As was said by some cynical member, who has since found out the truth of his own epigram, its motto ought to be "Neck or nothing."

"Off?"

"Yes."

"The machine-gun isn't quite ready, nor is the wireless. We may have the gun going in about a quarter of an hour; but the wireless can't be rigged up for some time."

"Can't wait."

The commandant of the Air Corps, who is also present, now has a short talk in an undertone with the departing airman. His last words are spoken high: "We shall be able to carry on. Number Nineteen will be ready in an hour, Number Ten in three hours, and Number Thirty before morning."

He then goes back to his work. There are no such things as "send-offs" in military aviation on service, nor is it the

custom for the *morituri*, as such, to salute anybody.

The observer-next-for-duty turns to the pilot sitting waiting on the monoplane.

"Bomb magazine charged?" It is distinctly a question designed to mislead.

"Yes, sir."

"Right. I am taking this trip alone. You can come down and stand by for the next."

This amounts to an order, and there is no room for any argument; but the desire to travel alone betrays the airman's intention and the question about the bomb magazine no longer deceives. He takes the pilot's place. His first act is to study the map while the machine is steady, to see how far in a direct line the east edge of Square J 16 is from the situation of the force whose movement it is so necessary to keep secret. But he does not at the moment waste any time in calculations which he will shortly be able to make at his leisure. Seizing the control, he tests the elevating and warping

gear and tries the steering with his feet. Then, after a last look round, he puts on his helmet and gloves, pulls down his unglazed goggles, and nods to a man at the propeller. The latter gives two preparatory swings, a big heave, and shouts "On." The airman repeats "On" as he throws open the throttle. The engine "bites" and starts at full speed, and the whole machine trembles and quivers like an excitable horse at a covert-side.

Throttling down to half-speed and then opening again to full, the airman watches the needle of the counter dial mount quickly up to eleven hundred and fifty revolutions and hover there. He also listens attentively to the purring of the engine, which is now pulling fiercely against the men holding the machine back. Satisfied with the "grain" of its rhythmic roar, he grips the control firmly, gets a fresh purchase on the steering-bar with his feet, and waves his right arm. The men let go. The machine runs forward with quickly - increasing speed,

dancing along until it leaves the ground and its motion steadies into that of flight.

Once clear of the ground the airman begins a spiral climb, turning to the left in a volute of large radius. An expert flyer, he soon feels the mouth of his mount, which he has not recently flown, and his touch on the control becomes as light as that of a good jockey on the mouth of a horse. He keeps the ascending and turning monoplane up to the bit without allowing it to lose speed, and occasionally counteracts its tendency to bank excessively by a flutter of the warp; but his movements are barely perceptible. As the machine swings round gracefully the sun again appears for a moment from between the clouds, and its rays, shining through the semi-transparent fabric of the planes, transform the monoplane into the likeness of a gigantic hawk-moth with gauzy wings of golden brown, the large black bull's-eyes and the numbers on the underside of the planes accentuating the resemblance.

Since the airman's attention is not distracted by the act of flying, which is entirely instinctive, he is able to concentrate his mind upon his tactics. The clouds are high, thank God! Before doing anything in the way of scouting he intends to take an unusual course—to climb at once to a height of five thousand feet, so as to obtain an extensive range of vision, and also to be high enough to gain that command of altitude which in action in the air is as necessary as the weather-gauge was in a sea-fight in the olden days. To reach that height will take nearly ten minutes. A brief mental calculation, based on times, distances, directions, and the estimated speed of the enemy, shows him that if the hostile biplane by chance or by design continues its course far enough to the south-west, he cannot prevent its discovering the presence of the Sixth and Seventh Army Corps out in that direction. But he may be able to intercept it on its return journey, and so prevent it getting away

with the information, which, after all, is the essential thing. It is true that by laying his course to head off the biplane in that one direction he may, if it reconnoitres elsewhere, miss it altogether; but so long as the great flanking movement is undiscovered, or is discovered and remains unreported, nothing else matters—nothing! And if he meets the hostile scout, he intends to take no chances by relying on such refinements as bomb-dropping. He will not even attempt the finesse of giving him the wash from his propeller. He will make a certainty of it, go the “whole hog,” and ram. It is this that explains his indifference to the absence of a machine-gun and his resolve to pilot himself.

Maintaining his angle of ascent by touch on the control, he continues to climb steadily and steeply, thanks to being overpowered and the absence of a passenger and of the unshipped wireless gear. Nor is there need to look at the speed-indicator dial. In the absence of wind the sweet

drone of the engine, now purring like the low note of a circular-saw, is a sufficient guarantee of speed.

At last the pencil of the barograph, which has been tracing a nice smooth slope without "saw teeth," crosses the five-thousand-foot line. Swinging round till the bearing of his course is due west, he readjusts his goggles and heads horizontally in the direction of the setting sun. The needle of the indicator jumps to ninety miles an hour.

So far he has one advantage, in his direction of approach. There is no sun to dazzle him, whereas, if the biplane takes its expected course somewhat earlier than he estimates, it will be silhouetted against the western sky, which, though overcast, is marbled with glowing spaces between the clouds. As he flies, his eyes continually search the horizon from west to south. He descries no speck, no blur, not even a bird. After a glance below and one at his map he throttles down and turns south. He has

travelled but a short distance on this course when he makes out, away to the south, just off the direction of the marching Sixth and Seventh Corps, at about three miles' distance, and somewhat below his own level, a faint smudge circling in the air—a smudge with a suggestion of light on it. He throws open the throttle and elevates, and with a growl his machine leaps upwards on a ten-degree slant. Discovery must be mutual and simultaneous, for the smudge at once turns and flees south, still climbing. For about a minute there is a stern-chase.

It has not been entirely by accident that the invaders' scouting biplane has so quickly discovered the secret of the defenders. The first machine to be repaired after the disastrous conflagration in their main aviation park, it has been sent out with the express purpose of discovering what the defenders have been doing behind their front line during their temporary freedom from espionage in the air. And it is of the south-

western portion of the battle area that least is known. The invaders' observer, also, has been made suspicious that he is getting "warm" by the fact that, for the last twenty minutes, after each wireless message to the ground station with which he is working, he has received the despairing letters—"J. E. S."—"Jammed by enemy's station," instead of the welcome "S. R."—"Signals read." Consequently it is not altogether a surprise for the two men on the biplane when they discover long columns veiled by dust on one, two, three, four parallel roads leading west, and hit upon the great concentration behind the enemy's left and opposite their own weak right. And the observer does not waste time in a meticulous investigation of numbers. Valuable as details generally are, it is in this case of absolutely vital importance that the bare intelligence of the presence of this large force should be conveyed to headquarters at once. He realises one thing most clearly: that the secret that has been discovered is of such

significance that the defenders will stop short of nothing to prevent him getting away with it.

He continues his efforts to get into touch with one of his own wireless stations to impart the news, though he has few hopes of success, and tries sending in turn on the three tunes with which his set is fitted. But the defenders' installations are evidently still busy interfering, and "J. E. S." is still all that he can get. The choice of the method of escape he leaves to the pilot, who better knows his own powers and limitations and those of his machine. As has been seen, the latter at first tries to get away by climbing, with the intention of getting above the cloud layer and then steering north-east. Then, on being discovered, he turns away from his destination, hoping that if the speeds of the two machines are not very unequal he may avoid an encounter till nightfall, and then run for his own lines under cover of darkness. It is not long before he discovers that the monoplane has the "wings of him," and must overhaul him

before dark. He realises that his pursuer will endeavour to ram; that in such a case his only course is to dodge; and that his best chance of dodging successfully is to do it when meeting the enemy, when the speed of approach of the two machines will be so great that a swerve will be most difficult to follow. Since he cannot climb above the monoplane, also, he decides to go as far below it as possible, so that any attempt to ram will probably end in a dive from which there will be no recovery in case of a miss.

Acting on this principle he turns and makes directly for his pursuer at a descending angle.

Full back—for it is he who is the pursuer—instantly flicks down his elevator, and the monoplane, engine at full speed, roars down an invisible slope in the air at a speed of one hundred and twenty miles an hour. He sees the object of the enemy's manœuvre, admires its cleverness and audacity, and smiles grimly. At the approach of the supreme moment the lust of battle seizes him and adds to the exaltation produced by

speed and patriotism. It is his old game. Subconsciously he sees before him a foggy field, and feels the hush that comes over it. Though the touch-line—the final touch-line—is some thousands of feet away this time, it can be reached very quickly; and his opponent, unless he has passed on his news already, by wireless, has no one to pass to, for he cannot drop his message in its weighted carrier until he gets over his own lines, which are far distant. As he leans forward in a tense attitude, a loose end of his scarf streams out rigid behind, like the hair of a Valkyrie. His moustache is blown to either side of his mouth, flattened against his cheeks, forced up his nostrils. His bared lips are set in a line.

The monoplane, descending in a curve which grows steeper and steeper as its target approaches, hisses through the air like a meteorite.

The two machines, now half a mile apart, are approaching at a rate of over three miles a minute.

On the biplane the observer has left the

transmitter and crouches behind the ready-belted machine-gun. Though there will only be time for very few rounds, even at the maximum rate of fire, before the two machines must meet, he opens fire on the off-chance of making a disabling hit.

The distance is now three hundred yards.

Now! Now! With a jerk the pilot of the biplane suddenly elevates fiercely—madly for one who wishes to survive. As he presses the control lever back almost against his seat the machine shivers with the strain put upon it; but the planes do not split, nor do the stays give way, and it slackens speed at once as it turns steeply upwards. That is enough. Forward goes the lever again, and the comparatively sluggish machine, in spite of the long length of copper wire trailing behind it, leaps forward once more like a live thing, “jinking” at the very last moment as a boar at the spear’s point.

Full back almost feels the check—which he has been expecting—before he sees it, and, as the other anticipates, responds by flattening his angle of descent. But he

does so only slightly, retaining something in hand, for he knows that the biplane must straighten or "stall" and drop.

When he sees it again dart forward he throws his whole weight upon the control with a snarl.

In a terrific *vol piqué* the monoplane dives downwards. Though its momentum in its former direction carries it onward in a curve, its path is not far from the vertical, and it descends with a crash upon its hapless prey. In flames and amidst a shower of detonations the mass of tangled wreckage drops spinning to earth.

Three more of the salt of their respective nations are out of play. And though for the rest of the armies "No side" does not yet sound, and the great game goes on, full back has saved again.

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